From bestselling author Arise Zhang, also known as

Fei Tian Ye Xiang

Twin Jades of Jiangdong

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Twin Jades
of Jiangdong
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Twin Jades of Jiangdong
江东双璧

NOVEL

1

WRITTEN BY
Fei Tian Ye Xiang
(Arise Zhang)
非天夜翔

TRANSLATION BY
moon

COVER ILLUSTRATION BY
LINXIZHIYI

INTERIOR ILLUSTRATIONS BY
idledee

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sevenseasentertainment.com.

TRANSLATION: moon
ADAPTATION: Joanne Marzolino
LOGO DESIGN: Victorio Marasigan
COVER DESIGN: Mariel Dágá
INTERIOR DESIGN: M. A. Lewife
COPY EDITOR: Jack Hamm
PROOFREADER: Ami Leh, Hnä
EDITOR: Jasmine Thone
PREPRESS TECHNICIAN: Salvador Chan Jr., April Malig, Jules Valera
PRODUCTION MANAGER: Clay Gardner
MANAGING EDITOR: Alyssa Scavetta
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF: Julie Davis
PUBLISHER: Lianne Sentar
VICE PRESIDENT: Adam Arnold
PRESIDENT: Jason DeAngelis

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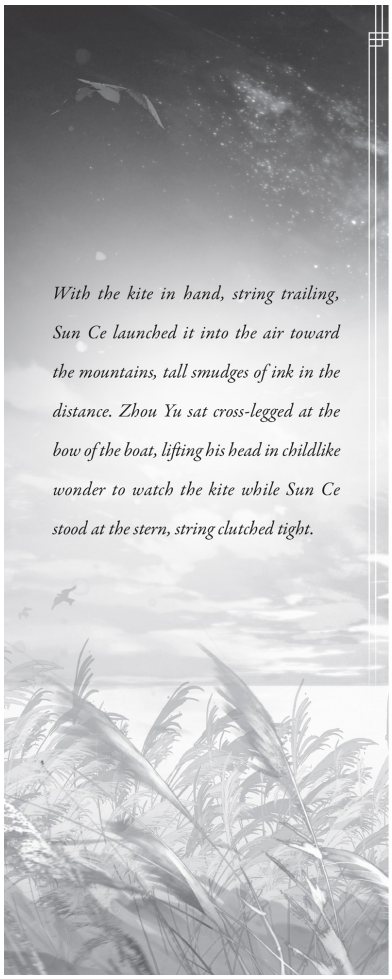


With the kite in hand, string trailing, Sun Ce launched it into the air toward the mountains, tall smudges of ink in the distance. Zhou Yu sat cross-legged at the bow of the boat, lifting his head in childlike wonder to watch the kite while Sun Ce stood at the stern, string clutched tight.

Chapter 1:
Peach Blossoms

MANY YEARS LATER, during the Battle of Chi Bi, the river was lit with blazing flames.

One of the warships suddenly imploded, sending up a flurry of sparks. Red lotuses bloomed across the horizon of water, and the warship's mast tilted. Hundreds of corpses bobbed up and down in the water, their blood staining the floating oars.

As Zhou Yu looked across this hellish crimson sea, he was reminded of the afternoon when he and Sun Ce had first met.

***

Zhou Yu turned four that year. Peach blossoms fluttered through the air, lit by pristine springtime sunlight.

Having just woken from an afternoon nap, he was crouching over the pond, feeding goldfish when he heard sounds of merriment behind him. Before he could turn around, a visiting child kicked him squarely into the pond.

He tumbled into the water with a splash, and the culprit pointed at him, laughing. Instead of shouting for help or yelling at him, Zhou Yu, coughing on the mouthfuls of chilly pond water he had inadvertently swallowed, swam to the other side of the pond and clambered out with a loud sneeze. He was soaked.

The other child smirked and came racing after to mock him. "Wow, I thought you'd sink like a stone!"

He scooted forward until his nose was but inches from Zhou Yu's face. "Oh, are you going to cry? Cry then, cry!"

Zhou Yu wiped his face dry with his sleeve, and the other child laughed.

“He’s crying!” the boy jeered.

Grabbing a handful of the other boy’s collar, Zhou Yu swung his fist into his face.

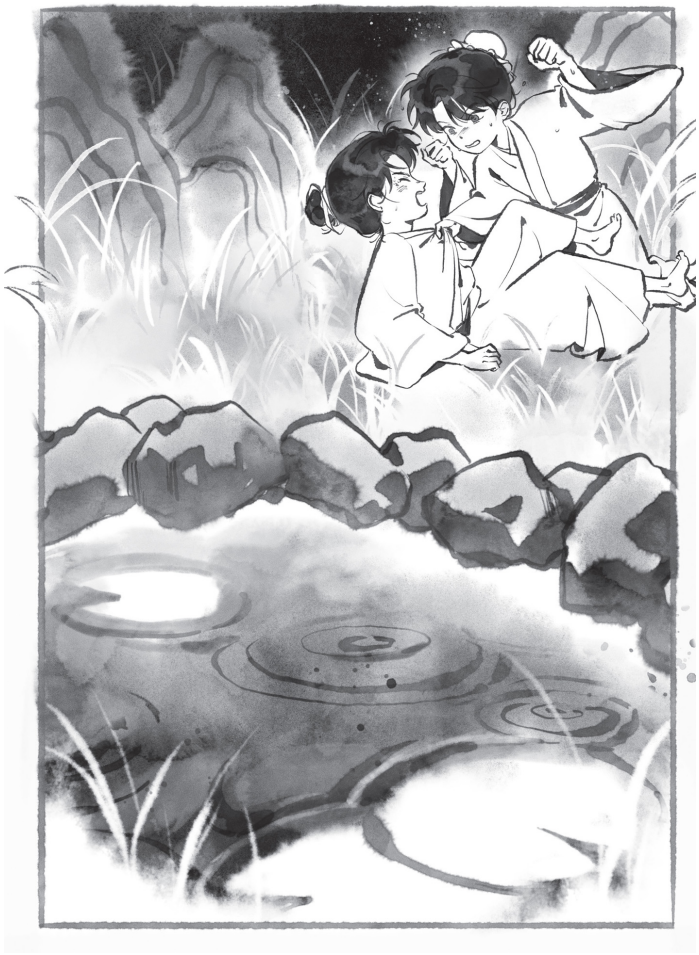
Since he was unprepared for such violent retaliation, the boy let out a scream. The two of them started fighting, right in the middle of the garden. Zhou Yu’s first punch was a warm-up, and now he pummeled his opponent, one hit after another aimed right for the nose. Overwhelmed, the other child attempted to run, earning him a strike to the back of his head. Stars swam in his vision, and he collapsed to the ground.

Zhou Yu clambered over him to pin him down and then proceeded to beat the life out of him. At first, the child was still able to cry for help, but as the thrashing went on, he lost the strength to shout, blood now pouring from his nose. The servants inside the house heard the commotion and rushed outside, startled by the sight.

“Little shaoye[1]!” they cried.

Both children’s families were shocked, and they tore Zhou Yu off the child he was throttling.

Later Zhou Yu’s father gave him a sound beating in turn, holding him down despite his cries and wails. The kid that he thrashed was half dead. In addition to a broken nose, he had developed a chill after his weakened body left him bedridden, and it took the efforts of a renowned physician and almost ten days of rest before he recovered.



***

That was the only time in his entire life that Zhou Yu's father had hit him. Even after all these years, he couldn't help but feel a vague, throbbing pain from his behind every time he thought about it.

When Zhou Yu had been a child, his father, Zhou Yi, had taken up a government position in Luoyang, and Zhou Yu had joined him there. It was in Luoyang that, upon laying eyes on Zhou Yu, the famous scholar Xu Shao—the very Xu Shao who described Cao Cao as "a capable advisor in a peaceful time, a dangerous hero in a turbulent world"—had remarked: "This child shall achieve remarkable deeds in the future. He is a born commander of men."

Zhou Yi's mouth had twitched when he heard those words, but he'd simply blown the wisps of his beard away with a disdainful sigh.

His reply had been indifferent. "Hmm. We shall see."

Several years passed while Zhou Yu remained in Luoyang with his father to further his studies. While it was a large city, Zhou Yu hadn't been able to find a single master willing to take him under their tutelage, so when he turned twelve, Zhou Yi had sent him back home to Shu County.

His mother had seemed older after his absence, and the world had begun teetering on the brink of collapse. And so, he returned home to help take care of the family business and continue his studies. Hopefully when it came time for him to participate in the regional examinations, he would be able to score well enough to gain a government position in Luoyang.

However, political tensions had worsened over the past few years and even his father, who had been serving in Luoyang, resigned and returned home. While spring bloomed, blazing fires of turbulence spread across the land, leaving refugees in its wake. Taking advantage of the chaos, the Yellow Turban Army, led by Zhang Jue, revolted and pillaged the regions around Ji Province and Yang Province. Zhou Yu's family's silk business lost access to their northern route several times.

This political turmoil was what prompted his father's return, and with him, he brought home a cartload of books and his two elderly servants. In

Zhou Yu's mother's words, "It was better to resign from that role and return home to start a business than to leave the family with no one to take care of it."

***

Zhou Yu sat at home, waiting anxiously for his father's return.

His homework was going to be reviewed, his sword practice inspected, and the family's business inquired after. He could not skimp on a single detail of what he had learned and had done over these past four years, as well as whom he had spent his time with.

His father had warned him not to befriend bad influences—but what was a "bad influence," and what was a "good influence"? He couldn't help but remember that boy who had fallen gravely ill due to his actions, Sun Ce. His father and the Sun family had been on good terms then, but Zhou Yu did not know how the magistrate of Xiapi County, Sun Jian, was doing now.

The chaos of the Yellow Turban Rebellion's spread across eight provinces now. Several local officials have already been hanged, and government manors burnt down. Even Wu County was not able to escape, so it's possible the Sun family has also been struck by disaster…

As he was thinking, a servant approached him.

"Shaoye, Laoye[2] sent a message that he arrived at the foot of Mount Gu last night. He most likely left this morning and is heading home now."

Zhou Yu stood up and straightened up his clothes. Ever since having woken up, he'd fiddled with his outfit multiple times, straightening his robes to the point they couldn't be any straighter. He belted his sword to his waist.

Once his father climbed over Mount Gu, Zhou Yu was planning to cross Lake Chao to welcome him home in person.

He found he couldn't settle down, sitting or standing, so he took to pacing back and forth in the hall. As he did, his thoughts returned to one of his father's frequent admonishments: "Those who carry a sword are either

wandering warriors or seekers of their own justice—those who slaughter for their own benefit.”

He quickly removed the weapon at his side. On second thought…the world was dangerous now; he would be better off bringing it along. As he seesawed back and forth on this choice, he wound up removing and reattaching the blade uncountable times.

In the end, he left with his sword at his hip.

***

After galloping on horseback to Lake Chao, he took a ferry to Mount Gu on the other side of the lake. A narrow path through cliffs split the mountain down the middle, and trailing alongside it was a stream of crystal clear water that flowed downhill like silk. The cries of monkeys echoed across the cliffsides, and birds soared high in the sky. Jagged peaks rose, lush and verdant, stacked one above the next, as beautiful as a painting. Taking this all in, Zhou Yu couldn’t help but be reminded of Sun Ce.

After the boy’s severe bout of illness, his father forced him to repent with three kowtows, and since words alone weren’t enough, Zhou Yu had gritted his teeth and made a kite as an apology gift for Sun Ce. However, Sun Ce’s childish nature meant that he had forgotten the entire thing in only a few days. Perplexingly, he’d apologized *to* Zhou Yu!

In the end, despite the drama the two of them had caused, the fight actually formed the foundation of their friendship. Zhou Yu could even remember how Sun Ce had held the kite in his hand and whined about wanting to fly it. The two of them, little Zhou Yu and little Sun Ce, had gone to Lake Chao to fly the kite together.

That afternoon the two of them had sat upon a bamboo raft that gently glided across the surface of the river, passing the rows of pine trees along both banks that resembled the deft strokes of an artist’s brush.

Zhou Yu had been pushing the raft, but he could barely hold the long pole aloft, even though he’d been taught by an experienced ferryman; Sun

Ce had been flying the kite, which had soared shakily through the narrow confines of the canyon…

***

As the boat docked, Zhou Yu put one hand on his sword and leaped steadily onto the shore. Without even a glance, he flicked his wrist, and a few copper coins landed, jangling, into the bamboo tube at the prow of the boat.

“Have a good one, Shaoye,” the ferryman said, smiling, a blade of straw dangling between his lips.

Zhou Yu turned back and cupped his fist as a salute before heading toward the mountain path, where an earlier spring shower had turned the ground into mud.

After a few steps, it struck him that the ferryman today was a stranger to him. Something was off, but he couldn’t put his finger on it, and he pondered as he walked. The ferryman had commanded explosive strength and was well-muscled, as if he were a martial arts practitioner.

That said, ferrying a boat required intense physical strength, so in the end Zhou Yu could not explain why this sat poorly with him.

***

Despite the lushness of the mountains, they were echoingly empty of life. Not even a single bird cry broke the silence as Zhou Yu crossed through the forest. As he approached the waystation, a Zhou family servant sprinted over, panting as he leaned on a tree to catch his breath. Zhou Yu’s heart leaped into his throat.

“Young master! Young master!” the servant cried. “Laoye, he…”

“Calm down.” Zhou Yu fought off the dizziness that threatened to overtake him. “Talk slowly. Don’t panic.”

The servant’s breathing began to even out.

“Some Yellow Turban rebels were wreaking havoc… At the new inn just past Mount Gu our Laoye was staying at last night, a group of Yellow Turban bandits came to rob us, and they took every courier and traveling merchant hostage. Our family’s carriages are still outside…”

A sudden ringing filled Zhou Yu’s ears, and he almost lost his balance. He dug his thumbs into his temples until his mind could focus again.

“The Yellow Turban bandits… How could they be at Mount Gu? Wait, Pinggui, you…”

Having finally calmed himself down, Zhou Yu took stock of the situation. His father had already retired from his government position, and upon being taken hostage by the bandits, he had neither money, goods, nor any women traveling with him, so there was nothing of value that could be taken—meaning he was a hostage for ransom. His father’s life was probably not in danger.

“Quick, report this to the Shu County magistrate,” Zhou Yu ordered. “Then go home and tell Fourth Uncle what happened, but do *not* let my mother know.”

The servant nodded, astonished.

“Now hurry! Go, quickly,” Zhou Yu said. “I’ll scout out the situation.”

He drew his sword and decided to head through the peach blossom grove instead of taking the main road, picking out a path through the trees. As he walked, he reassured himself that his father had been an honest and fair official throughout his career, so the Zhou family should not suffer too much from this misfortune.

Shocking as this hostage situation was, his father’s life was not at any risk. The Yellow Turban bandits just wanted money, and there might be no choice but to relinquish it to them.

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Even after half a day of travel, Zhou Yu found his heart still simmered with an indescribable restlessness. One moment he would be planning how to rescue his father and the other innocent traveling merchants, and the next, he would worry over how the government would deal with this. What if he startled their enemy and the hostages ended up hurt instead? What would happen if his mother found out too soon? She had always been frail, and he was afraid the news would badly shock her.

By the time Zhou Yu arrived at the inn, the sun was already setting.

The twilight cast his shadow as a long, dark streak across the path. The inn was burnt to ash and had partially collapsed. Charred corpses lay among the ruins.

A phrase had been scrawled across the razed wall surrounding the inn: *The heavens are dead! The Yellow Turbans shall rise!*

Suddenly, he heard something from within the ruins—the low, hoarse sobs of a man weeping. Zhou Yu's heart skipped a beat, and he hurried toward the sound. As he approached, Zhou Yu glanced through a small crack between the bricks, only to see that amid the smoldering rubble a man knelt in front of another.

That man drew a dagger from his belt and stabbed downward. The sobbing stopped.

Zhou Yu's pulse quickened, and he held his breath, not daring to alarm the robber as he slowly crept forward.

He drew his sword, and the bronze blade gleamed as bright as snow, reflecting the brilliant red light of the sunset.

"Who's there?!" the man shouted, suddenly alert.

Zhou Yu barged in. "Set down your weapons!"

The point of a staff flew toward him, extending silently into his field of vision. Zhou Yu parried, his sword taking the hit, held horizontally across his chest, before he swept it forward. Sword and staff collided, conjuring a reverberation, a dragon's roar that echoed into the blood-tinged twilight sky.

"Very good!" the man said.

As he and Zhou Yu faced each other, their eyes met, and Zhou Yu's focus wavered for a split second. The merest breath of time passed, but in

that moment thousands of years flew by, fates shifted and changed.

His opponent turned out to be a young man about the same age as Zhou Yu. He wore a plain martial robe. His inky black eyebrows lent the young man's carefree demeanor the air of a fine painting. The brightly gleaming dark pupils of his eyes, the corners of his lips curving upward slightly, and the arch of his nose bridge all lent him a heroic air. Mentally, Zhou Yu admired his visage; he hadn't thought the Yellow Turban bandits would have such a valiant man in their ranks.

But as the young man looked back at Zhou Yu, astonishment flickered across his face.

In the next instant, both of them snapped back to reality. Zhou Yu swiftly pulled back, slamming one foot backward onto the wall. The poor structure, after so much abuse, shuddered and collapsed with a loud crash.

Zhou Yu's opponent swept his weapon forward, corkscrewing broken bricks up with his spinning staff, and swung it toward Zhou Yu, sending shards raining forth like a flurry of petals.

What had started as an ambush had quickly transformed into a full-blown fight!

The young man's staff techniques involved large, forceful movements, dependent on iron might and brute force. Every downward sweep of the staff sent up a gust of wind.

Only a few moments into their fight, they had already flattened what was left of the inn.

Zhou Yu was forced back again and again as he was battered by the wind generated by the staff's swipes. He felt like a leaf caught in a typhoon. And the more he fought, the deeper he fell into shock; he couldn't defeat this bastard!

Zhou Yu had severely underestimated his opponent.

Making the choice to momentarily withdraw, he dashed into the grove of peach blossoms. The other man was relentless, chasing so near to Zhou Yu he might as well have been his shadow.

The trees were knitted tight around them, confining most of his pursuer's staff techniques. Instead, he tucked his iron staff closer in, taking

up a form focused on precision and aimed jabs. Zhou Yu noted this adaptability; this young man was no ordinary mountain bandit. He had to have been taught by a notable master.

“Halt!” Zhou Yu shouted. “I’m not your enemy!”

“You’re admitting defeat?” the young man asked, grinning.

Without knowing why, Zhou Yu was enraged by that question. Despite his anger, he stayed silent, thinking, *I choose not to fight because it’s needless. You think I’m afraid of the likes of you?*

He whipped around, his sword moving in tandem with his body, and rained a flurry of blows down upon the other man. The young man started to pull back, but then he noticed Zhou Yu’s attacks were frenzied. Such openings would provide an easy victory.

“Good!” he shouted, pressing forward to return blows.

Zhou Yu’s bronze sword spun through the air, turning into thousands of cold, shining streaks. He feinted, one sword turning into three, three turning into ten, as they repeatedly materialized. With one final sweep of his sword, peach blossoms filled the air. A single petal gently floated to land on the spine of his blade.

Right as Zhou Yu sliced a horizontal arc, his foe dodged the point of his blade. Held in place by the still air surrounding it, the petal did not fly off Zhou Yu’s sword. With his next strike, his weapon flowed like water, transitioning from soft to hard techniques as he knocked the man’s staff aside.

That move, the “Qin assassination” technique, was from the Warring States period and was used in the attempted assassination of the King of Qin. When all else failed, a drawn dagger was the last resort—not intended to be a killing blow, but hiding amid the sky filled with dancing peach blossoms.

Time froze, and his opponent’s pupils contracted, the irises reflecting Zhou Yu’s sword-wielding silhouette. The two of them shouted in unison.

“Back off!” Zhou Yu bellowed.

Peach blossoms burst through the air, flitting toward him.

“Gongjin! Show mercy!” yelled the young man.

Zhou Yu stilled, and the young man charged against the breeze his attack had generated. The staff flew forth, and right as Zhou Yu thought victory was his, it slipped through his fingers. The staff struck the broad side of his sword, sending it flying off to the side where it embedded itself into a tree. Zhou Yu couldn't stop his forward momentum, and his body crashed into the arms of the young man.

"You…" Zhou Yu was speechless.

He now remembered the bastard he hadn't seen for years, with his carefree, lighthearted outlook on life…

"Are you going to cry?"

A jeering face right in front of him, face twisted in mockery, their noses almost touching.

"Cry then, cry! He's crying…"

That voice echoed through his mind.

"Is this kite for me, Zhou Yu?"

"Yu, a name for someone as pretty as jade. My name is Sun Ce. Ce, the mastermind; when I give a command, no one can refuse…"

They bobbed along on a little wooden raft, engulfed by the backdrop of the azure river, the dark, inky mountains, and the endless sky, where a lone swallow flew homeward… The kite, its long tail fluttering gently, drifted with the wind in that same blue sky.

“Sun Bofu.” Zhou Yu pried his sword from the tree. “How did you recognize me?”

The man before him was indeed Sun Ce, and he laughed before approaching Zhou Yu and clasping an arm about him tightly. Then he punched him in the head.

Zhou Yu shoved him away, aggrieved, and admonished him for fooling around. Sun Ce dragged Zhou Yu along, and Zhou Yu dragged his sword along. It wasn’t long before Zhou Yu was dragged all the way back to the inn by this apelike old friend of his.

***

Night fell on the western side of the mountain, and their campfire flickered beside the remains of the inn, casting warm light on Zhou Yu’s and Sun Ce’s faces.

“My father sent me here to investigate,” Sun Ce said. “I didn’t know Uncle would be at this inn.”

Zhou Yu frowned, and he let out a short, distracted hum. Sun Ce’s hand found Zhou Yu’s shoulder in a reassuring pat.

“Don’t worry, they only want money. I already sent someone back to report on the situation.”

“I’m afraid that—” Before he could finish his sentence, Sun Ce’s hand extended over Zhou Yu’s shoulder to snake around his neck, his other hand slapping over Zhou Yu’s mouth.

Zhou Yu blinked.

Sun Ce pushed him away with a laugh before nudging him with his fist again. Zhou Yu wasn’t used to this jocular interaction, and he

envisioned puffing up like an angry cat. Yet, he found that he couldn't really summon the energy to be angry.

"How have the past few years been?" Sun Ce asked. "When I first heard you were studying in Luoyang, I wanted to go and meet up, but my father had been given a new post in Changsha, so we couldn't leave."

"Not bad," Zhou Yu replied, absentmindedly adding more fuel to the campfire. "Reading, accounting, managing the family business, obeying my father's teachings, looking after my mother… It went by quickly. What about you? And how did you manage to recognize me?"

"Remember, my father gave your father the ancient sword Chijun as a present. How could I not recognize it?" Sun Ce asked, chuckling.

Zhou Yu nodded, and Sun Ce clapped his back.

"My mother stuck me with a younger brother, so I have to deal with nuisances from morning to night until my brain is fried. Same old, same old: reading, practicing martials arts, drilling troops…"

Zhou Yu began to laugh. He shook his head, but he didn't know whether he was laughing at Sun Ce or himself. This man's life was much more exciting than his own; he didn't seem like he could stop for even a moment.

Zhou Yu continued, "Why did you come here alone? Your father's not concerned?"

Sun Ce laughed but did not respond. Instead, he flicked away the hay stalk in his mouth. Then he raised an eyebrow at Zhou Yu.

"Rest up and replenish your strength so tomorrow we can head up the mountain to investigate."

Zhou Yu blinked, thrown off by this shift in topic, but Sun Ce had already lain down. Despite his apprehension, Zhou Yu decided to go to sleep too.

The night winds blew, scattering peach blossoms into the air. Zhou Yu hadn't rested all day, and his body was exhausted, yet he tossed and turned restlessly as he worried about his father. In contrast, after a few short moments, Sun Ce's breathing evened out, and he sank into dreams, sleeping soundly.

Foreboding thoughts haunted Zhou Yu, and it wasn't until the moon rose high into the sky that he finally managed to drift off.

***

Zhou Yu drifted into consciousness, feeling as though much time had passed.

His surroundings were still.

As Zhou Yu's eyes flashed open, a single peach blossom petal alighted on his handsome face. The grove was eerily quiet, and the doom of something unnameable made him uneasy. He reached out and grabbed the hilt of the sword at his side.

"Bofu?" Zhou Yu whispered.

Sun Ce had disappeared, and the moss-covered stone that he had been lying on earlier was bare. Zhou Yu sat up and found Sun Ce's martial robe draped over him, still faintly carrying Sun Ce's scent. Zhou Yu rose as moonlight shone down onto his face.

Where was he? Zhou Yu's anxiety returned before he began to think things through. It was unlikely he had been kidnapped, or he would have heard the commotion and woken up.

He noticed footprints in the mud leading out of the peach blossom grove, so he followed their trail. The silver moon was slowly setting behind the western side of the mountain, casting an ethereal glow over the silent peaks, and the river to the east of Mount Gu reflected its twinkling light.

Zhou Yu reached the side of the river, where he was suddenly yanked behind the cover of a tree trunk.

"Shh!" Sun Ce was hiding there, his robes whiter than snow.

Zhou Yu immediately understood. "What did you find out?"

"In the middle of the night, I heard someone striking a woodblock," Sun Ce said. "Three long strikes, one short: a signal. I found my way here, only to see a black-sailed ship carrying away a group of people wielding swords. I was just about to decide if I should go wake you."

“Was it a white-bottomed ferry with black sails, with a hollow bamboo tube at its prow?” Zhou Yu asked, heart thumping.

“Yes!” Sun Ce confirmed, surprised. “The boatman wore a low bamboo hat, so I couldn’t see his face clearly. You know him?”

Zhou Yu waved his hand as a suspicion rose in his mind. He recalled the boatman who had ferried him over, and a vague sense of danger crept over him. Would a boatman really ferry people in the middle of the night? Something was afoot; maybe he had been bribed.

Luckily, Zhou Yu could navigate this part of the river in his sleep. This was an isolated waterway, and there was only one road.

Sun Ce spread his arms, casting a glance back, and Zhou Yu stared, curious. Following Sun Ce’s gaze to the robe Zhou Yu held, he finally understood the other man’s intent—he wanted Zhou Yu to enrobe him. Zhou Yu did.

“You still know how to swim, right? Let’s follow them,” Sun Ce said as he tightened his sash around his waist.

Zhou Yu nodded and gestured for him to wait as he hung his own outer robe over a branch. He then bent over to pick a reed, dangling it from his lips. Sun Ce was still watching in confusion when Zhou Yu leaped into the water with a splash.

“Oi!” Sun Ce said, startled. “Slow down!”

Sun Ce jumped in after him. With the moonlight illuminating Zhou Yu’s robes, he slipped through the water like the silver flash of a fish, sometimes slinking into the depths, other times straightening his body and darting like an arrow toward the surface of the lake. Sun Ce followed, clumsily paddling. His movements were so large and ungainly, Zhou Yu was struck speechless. He rolled his eyes and helped him, wrapping one arm around his waist as he led him toward the opposite bank.

Occasionally the two of them would poke their reeds out of the water to suck in a breath; the late spring river water was bone-chillingly cold, but Zhou Yu was a skilled swimmer. In less than fifteen minutes, he had guided Sun Ce into the underground waterway, and the two of them breached the water’s surface.

Sun Ce gasped for breath. “Your swimming skills are just as I remember…”

“Hush,” Zhou Yu replied.

The two of them crept through the waterway until they came across its hidden grotto.

“I’ve been here before!” Sun Ce exclaimed.

“Twelve years ago, we came here together.”

The memories returned to Sun Ce now—they had played here many times. But the grotto had seen recent activity; the ground was covered in countless footprints, and there were even old campfire ashes. Sun Ce, staff in hand, and Zhou Yu, sword drawn, continued slowly into the grotto’s depths.

From afar came quiet shuffling sounds of people moving. This location had another exit, and after they passed through a narrow forest of stalactites, a dim glow appeared in front of their eyes. The cavern opened into a valley filled with peach blossom trees, and a narrow road wound through it, leading to one of the lesser peaks of Mount Gu. Zhou Yu was inwardly shocked—had they stumbled across a hideout of the Yellow Turban bandits?

It was almost daybreak, and the dim light of the early morning shone down on the rising fog. They stopped at a pond, where Zhou Yu cupped the clear water into his hands and washed his face while Sun Ce stood to one side, gazing at the distant peaks.

“This should be their hideout,” Sun Ce said. “Your guess was right. That ferryman is probably an agent from the Yellow Turban Army, and his primary job is to rob people.”

Zhou Yu wiped the water from his face and shook his hands dry.

“Bofu, I’ll stay here and investigate. You should report back to Lord Sun.”

Sun Ce smiled wryly. “I’d like to, but my dad is currently in Jiangdu. Distant water can’t put out a nearby fire.”

Zhou Yu blinked.

“Didn’t you say your dad sent you here?” Zhou Yu asked.

Sun Ce didn’t answer his question. “Let’s go; we’ll figure out what’s going on first.”

Defeated, Zhou Yu threw up his hands, which Sun Ce grabbed to pull Zhou Yu to his feet.

The two of them continued to walk. After a few paces, Sun Ce turned his head back. “Actually, my dad doesn’t know I left the army to come to Shu County.”

Zhou Yu couldn’t believe his ears. “What?!”

“Don’t be so loud!” Sun Ce pleaded. “Actually, I was thinking of you, so I made a special trip.”

Zhou Yu felt weak; he’d thought Sun Jian’s army was close by, but Sun Ce had come here alone. There were no reinforcements to speak of! They had no way to escape their situation.

The sun had already risen over the two dampened youths, and they trekked along the mountain path.

“I sent my family’s servant off with a message,” Zhou Yu said.

“Shh.” Sun Ce grabbed him, darting them both off to one side of a fork in the road. A group of martial artists, all carrying blades, yellow scarves wrapped around their heads, were walking slowly up the road.

“Where did they go…”

“Shit, how could we lose them…”

Their voices grew distant. Zhou Yu and Sun Ce exchanged a glance; there was no reason to argue over who would go back now. Instead, they followed the men.

Sun Ce circled around in a large loop and said quietly, “Here.”

He climbed the slope of the mountain, dragging Zhou Yu behind. Clambering up the cliff, the two of them peeked out. Their vantage point revealed a valley of small houses surrounded by a circle of sentry posts, all framed by mountain peaks. Within, people were milling about. It looked like a military encampment of about a hundred.

Seeing how the camp was arranged, Zhou Yu knew things were bad.

“Doesn’t that look like the layout of an official army?” Sun Ce asked skeptically, his mouth pressed to Zhou Yu’s ear. “These people are rigorously trained, and their camp is well organized. There’s even a hitching post for their horses. These are the habits of army troops.”

“Let’s get closer,” Zhou Yu replied, worried. Were these troops pretending to be Yellow Turban rebels? This situation was more complicated than he’d expected.

“You wait; I’ll go down,” Sun Ce replied.

Unable to let him to walk into danger on his own, Zhou Yu tailed him. Sneaking into a camp like this in the middle of the day could be deadly. But since his father’s life was on the line, Zhou Yu couldn’t let this drag out any longer.

Sun Ce silently knocked out one of the gate guards with his staff while Zhou Yu climbed into a tree, observing the houses from above. A man exited one of the buildings; he was wearing an imperial officer’s uniform, his face bright red. It was clear he’d been drinking, and he staggered around, wasted.

Zhou Yu jolted, gesturing for Sun Ce to retreat, but Sun Ce ignored him, darting behind another small house to peek inside.

“Who’s there?!” someone shouted angrily after being startled awake.

Sun Ce withdrew, but the man was alarmed, and someone else came charging from inside.

“They’re right inside! Don’t come down!” Sun Ce roared.

His words were for Zhou Yu’s benefit—Sun Ce meant to sacrifice himself. Then Zhou Yu could escape and report what he’d seen. Zhou Yu wiped his sweaty palms as Sun Ce pulled out his long staff, bowling over the soldiers who rushed him. Arrows flew toward him, and Sun Ce struck them out of the air with his staff. The commander of the troops charged in, his eyes blazing like fire as his rage peaked.

“Now you’re asking for it!” he shouted.

That cry made Zhou Yu’s eardrums ring, but Sun Ce didn’t even flinch as he swung a powerful blow at his new opponent.

The commander’s long spear crashed against Sun Ce’s staff. Sun Ce could only attack three times before a single spear-thrust sent him tumbling. This warrior was extraordinary, and the class of his style was so rare that Zhou Yu had only seen it a few times before. Once Sun Ce fell, the soldiers surrounded him and pinned him against the ground.

“How many companions do you have?” The general smiled coldly. “Come out! Now!”

Sun Ce grinned back icily. “Impressive. I admit defeat.”

The general unsheathed his sword and pressed it against Sun Ce’s neck. “I’ll count to three. Come out or his head hits the ground.”

“Go back and report, now!” Sun Ce shouted.

“Stop!” Zhou Yu called out.

He leaped from the tree, tossing aside his Chijun sword as he cupped his hands in salute.

“General Hua, what brings you to such a desolate place, where there isn’t even a trace of civilization?”

The general’s expression darkened, and he didn’t speak. Sun Ce came back to his senses and he looked that military general up and down, dumbstruck.

“Hua Xiong?!”

It was indeed the warrior Hua Xiong, whose name was renowned across the Yang and Jing provinces. It surprised him this young man could recognize him on sight, and he inspected Zhou Yu from head to toe but couldn’t discern his identity. Unbeknownst to him, when Zhou Yu was with his father in the capital, he had seen Hua Xiong once. Obviously since then Zhou Yu had grown and changed in appearance, but Hua Xiong hadn’t changed much.

“Who are you?” Hua Xiong asked, suspicious.

A thought flashed into Zhou Yu’s mind and he bowed deeply. “General Hua, I am—”

“General!” The ferryman they had been looking for approached and removed his bamboo hat. “These are the two we’re looking for! Capture

them!”

“Grab them!” Hua Xiong shouted.

“General Hua, please listen!” Zhou Yu pleaded.

The soldiers came forward, grabbing both of them and dragging them into a secret chamber. Zhou Yu continued to shout futilely, “General! Don’t be deceived! There’s a conspiracy here…”

Hua Xiong’s face twitched as Zhou Yu and Sun Ce were forced away.

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Zhou Yu and Sun Ce were shoved into a gloomy house, landing in the dirt. As Zhou Yu rose, Sun Ce grabbed his collar.

“You’re smart; why didn’t you use your brain this time?!” he growled, teeth gritted.

Zhou Yu was at the end of his rope too.

“Don’t you know anything? That bastard will kill anyone without batting an eye! He was about to behead you without question!”

Sun Ce stilled, and Zhou Yu continued quietly, “When I was in Luoyang, Father and I went to welcome Dong Zhuo, and Hua Xiong was at the banquet. He got plastered and beheaded a serving girl!”

Sun Ce had never heard of such an insane person before and found himself at a loss for words. Finally, he sighed.

“That he’s in charge surprised me. We’re in deep trouble,” Zhou Yu said.

Sun Ce shifted to peek out of the dingy window.

“I saw that drunkard’s uneven steps, so I thought I could easily knock him out. I didn’t think he’d be a powerful martial artist. I can hear people being held in the next room; I bet they were captured.”

Zhou Yu paced in the tight space. “Why are they pretending to be members of the Yellow Turban Army? Why did he come here to capture these people?”

Sun Ce didn’t respond, instead quietly watching Zhou Yu. When their gazes met, Zhou Yu saw that Sun Ce’s eyes were unreadable, and he remembered what was weighing most heavily on his heart.

“I heard He Jin is chasing down and killing his political opponents to remove dissidents,” Sun Ce said matter-of-factly. “A month ago, Li Jue came to visit under the orders of He Jin and Dong Zhuo to entice my father to join them. They want to remove the Three Counsellors of the State system. When my dad heard the news, he immediately sent someone to inform your dad. I was afraid that something would happen to you, so I came to check.”

Zhou Yu felt a warm glow in his chest, but Sun Ce wasn’t finished. “I guess I was still one step behind. For anyone to actually disguise themselves as members of the Yellow Turban Army means that Dong Zhuo’s probably also involved… Ah, I was careless.”

“Can you see my dad?” Zhou Yu asked.

Sun Ce was silent for a moment, then shook his head. “He’s not in the next room, so he might have been taken back to Luoyang. Let’s figure out how we’re going to escape first. Hua Xiong’s definitely suspicious and will question us thanks to what you said earlier. When he does, we need to make him lower his guard before finding a way to escape.”

Zhou Yu smiled bitterly. “It won’t be easy.”

“Confining me won’t do him any good. My dad has our back, and since Dong Zhuo wants to drag in my family, how could he do anything to us?” Sun Ce said.

That’s only the case for you… Zhou Yu thought. Hua Xiong wasn’t going to be merciful to Zhou Yu’s family, so Sun Ce had to escape first.

“When he calls for us, follow my lead,” Sun Ce warned. “That bastard’s so drunk he doesn’t know up from down.”

“Yes, yes,” Zhou Yu said. “You’re brilliant.”

Sun Ce began to smile before looking out the window. Even though they were in grave danger, Zhou Yu felt safe. Sun Ce’s smile was that reassuring.

The door to the cramped, dark room opened, and a group of people stormed in. They held Sun Ce down to bind him.

“Stop! We’ll cooperate!” protested Zhou Yu.

Sun Ce glanced at him meaningfully, trying to convey calm, and Zhou Yu found himself tied up a few moments later. The two of them had their hands bound behind their backs as they were shoved to their knees in Hua Xiong’s house.

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“Tell me your names,” Hua Xiong said icily as he lifted a jug of wine.

“Zhou Yu, courtesy name Gongjin,” Sun Ce said. “General Hua, what is your purpose in detaining my father?”

Zhou Yu started, but Sun Ce raised his eyebrows slightly to remind Zhou Yu what he had said earlier. Zhou Yu had to remain silent, and he bit his tongue while ducking his head.

Hua Xiong knocked back a mouthful of wine—and choked on it. His face burned red. He slammed the jug down and turned to Zhou Yu.

“And you? Speak!” he growled, enraged.

“He’s Sun Ce,” Sun Ce responded.

As Zhou Yu knelt before the general, a thought flashed through his mind. He didn’t know why Sun Ce was doing this, but he understood enough: They had to temporarily exchange identities in front of Hua Xiong.

But what is his plan?

“My father is the prefect of Changsha, Sun Jian,” he answered.

Hua Xiong’s expression shifted, and he looked Zhou Yu over.

“Loose his bonds!” he demanded.

His orders were instantly obeyed, and Zhou Yu stretched his wrists.

Hua Xiong’s smile was frigid. “Go, tell your father to stop poking his nose around here. He won’t get a second chance. If I catch you barging in

again, you'll only have yourself to blame!"

Zhou Yu understood now. Hua Xiong wasn't afraid of the Zhou family, but he *was* afraid of Sun Ce's father. Sun Jian was prefect of Changsha, commanded a large number of troops, and took his orders from the prestigious Yuan Shu, whose family had held government positions for generations. A falling-out in front of Dong Zhuo would not help his reputation.

Sun Ce was doing this to protect him.

"I heard this region was being attacked by the Yellow Turban Army," Zhou Yu said. "My father sent me to investigate a matter regarding them and the Zhou family."

Hua Xiong hummed as he responded, "Petty thieves; there's not enough of them to be a problem. There are Yellow Turban bandits here, yes, but they've been incorporated into this general's troops."

"Where's my father?" Sun Ce asked.

"I haven't seen him. Why?" Hua Xiong responded.

"Gongjin, don't be rude to General Hua," Zhou Yu said to Sun Ce.

Sun Ce chuckled joylessly. "I'm afraid that the two of you worked together to bring me here under false pretenses, and you want to decimate the Zhou family!"

These words reminded Zhou Yu of his father, and countless thoughts flashed through his head.

"Who do you think you are?! Drag him outside and beat him!" Hua Xiong roared.

Zhou Yu blanched, and he prepared to beg for mercy, but Hua Xiong's subordinates quickly dragged Sun Ce outside.

"General Hua! Zhou— Gongjin is my friend! On behalf of my father, show him mercy!" Zhou Yu pleaded.

Hua Xiong ignored him, instead swigging more wine. Outside, Sun Ce cried in pain, but two guards blocked Zhou Yu from running out.

He sucked in a breath, turned toward Hua Xiong, and bowed so low his hands grazed the ground. He finally understood Sun Ce's words.

“A month ago, my father and General Li Jue met,” Zhou Yu said. “I am to pass a message on to the capital.”

“Just now, those two villains you mentioned.” Hua Xiong regarded Zhou Yu. “What did you mean?”

The crack of a whip rang out, and Sun Ce howled in pain. Zhou Yu’s heart leaped up into his mouth. The sound of Sun Ce being beaten made him lose control of his emotions and scattered his thoughts.

A cruel grin curled the edges of Hua Xiong’s mouth. Zhou Yu racked his brain, hating that he hadn’t considered a strategy. However, as Sun Ce’s pained cries rang out, one after another, Zhou Yu realized Sun Ce had to be pretending. Even if he was beaten or lashed, he would bear it stoically. This blatant shouting was exaggerated.

“It was…it was…” Zhou Yu thought for a moment, calming his fluttering heart. “Please bear with this subject as he asks a question. Is Zhou Yi of Luoyang still in the general’s hands at this point?”

“I already said he’s not!” Hua Xiong yelled. “You also want a beating? Guards!”

“General!” Forced to think under pressure, Zhou Yu came up with a brilliant idea. “This is a ploy! Someone contrived this meeting so as not to dirty their own hands! General, please see the truth.”

Hua Xiong’s expression faltered, so Zhou Yu pressed on. “He Jin’s plans are twisted and strange. If he wanted to kill Zhou Yi, why would he not personally send someone? Why pretend it was General Hua and Lord Dong? As the commander in chief, his power is absolute—he may eliminate his opponents as he wishes. If he wishes to make Luoyang his territory, all he needs do is remove the old officials of the court! He’s clearly taking this opportunity to send you here to eliminate Zhou Yi and his descendants. If my predictions are correct, He Jin has left a spy by your side.”

Hua Xiong’s eyes flickered; clearly he was remembering the ferryman.

Zhou Yu had figured out what was going on. In the political mire of Luoyang, the emperor’s ability to maintain power was in jeopardy, and the brother of his favorite concubine held most of the political power. To erase

his political opponents, he'd secretly colluded with the Jin Province prefect Dong Zhuo; both of them were using each other while holding each other at arm's length. Since Hua Xiong was under Dong Zhuo's command, he had to know about these tensions.

"If this subject may speak freely, should General Hua eliminate Zhou Yi, upon his return to Luoyang, the blame would fall upon the general's head. At that time, He Jin could come up with any excuse…" Zhou Yu said.

Hua Xiong's expression swung from shock to suspicion as he considered Zhou Yu.

"Are these your father's words or yours?"

"Uh…" Sun Ce's cries were growing weaker. Zhou Yu hurried to speak. "My father only mentioned it before sending me to stand guard in Shu County; one because we are old friends with the Zhou family, and two because perhaps He Jin's ploy of borrowing someone else's blade to commit a murder would bear fruit…"

"What would you do in my stead?" Hua Xiong said.

"Send Zhou Yi back to the capital and hand him over to Grand General He Jin. That way, you'll no longer be the scapegoat." Hua Xiong fell silent, so Zhou Yu continued, "Sun— Zhou Gongjin is pitiful; he was merely showing his filial piety when he butted heads with the general. Please grant him another chance. Sun Ce thanks the general for his gracious act of kindness in advance."

With his piece said, Zhou Yu lifted up the hem of the robe to kowtow to him.

Hua Xiong didn't have a feud with the Zhou family, and he had come simply because He Jin sent him to assassinate a government official. There wasn't enough wine or meat, and he was covered in mud from his fall. With all that in mind, he changed his mind and decided not to argue any longer.

"Let him be," he called out, voice gruff.

At his word, the crack of the whip ceased. Sun Ce slumped into the mud, and Zhou Yu hurried to assess his injuries. The skin of his back was split and covered in wounds. His robe was soaked with blood, and he lay still.

Oh no, Zhou Yu thought, but just as his heart squeezed, he saw Sun Ce's eyes open just a slit, and he winked.

Zhou Yu blinked.

"Where are your father's troops stationed?" Hua Xiong asked.

"At Jiangdu, and I shall return now that the message has been delivered. Before, I did not know it was General Hua who came, so in the coming days, if the general passes through Changsha, please do not hesitate to visit this subject's home for a cup of wine, so Zho— Sun-mou[3] can show the general proper hospitality as a host."

Hua Xiong's eyes fixed on Zhou Yu who was helping Sun Ce up from the ground.

"This subject earnestly requests that the general allow this subject to take young Lord Zhou away," Zhou Yu said.

Hua Xiong stopped him. "Wait! You say you are Sun Jian's eldest son, but where's your proof? Do you have a token?"

Zhou Yu's face was firm, and his pulse stayed steady; he thought of something. "The bronze sword General Hua took has been kept hidden by my father; it's the ancient Chijun that was found in Changsha."

Hua Xiong lifted his head and gestured for his subordinates to bring over the sword and Sun Ce's Coiling Dragon Staff. Zhou Yu was overprotective of the sword, and had been even as a child. It had been crafted by the famous master Ou Yezi during the Warring States period, and the blade was ornately carved with ancient patterns.

Sun Ce's weapon was a qimei iron staff made from a meteor, and the staff had coiled dragons carved along its length.

One glance told Hua Xiong that this sword wasn't ordinary; it was a divine blade. He no longer doubted Zhou Yu's identity. Seeing Hua Xiong's envious gaze, Zhou Yu steeled himself—he'd hate to part with his precious sword, but if Hua Xiong asked for it, he would have no choice.

Zhou Yu figured it was better to offer than be forced, and he smiled. "If the general likes it, there is no harm in keeping the sword."

"Hey," Hua Xiong protested, "who do you take me for? I won't ask for a kid's things."

Zhou Yu smiled. “No offense taken, General. Your fearsome reputation is renowned.”

Hua Xiong waved his hand in dismissal, knowing he couldn’t take it, and his subordinates returned the sword and the staff. He cast a look at Sun Ce, who was leaning against Zhou Yu’s shoulder, before he gazed back at Zhou Yu with a question in his eyes: *How are you planning on dealing with this bastard?*

Zhou Yu addressed Sun Ce. “Your father isn’t here. On behalf of my own, General Hua has agreed to send troops to find him. Quickly, give him your thanks.”

Sun Ce nodded, drained of energy, and Hua Xiong waved them away with a large hand. “Run along, and wait for me to send word.”

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Zhou Yu propped Sun Ce up as they took the mountain path out of the hideout.

Sun Ce panted in pain as the two of them walked out of the encampment, so Zhou Yu sped up as best he could.

“Quickly! That ferryman knows us. I’m afraid once our identities are uncovered, they’ll chase us down.”

“Ow ow ow…” Sun Ce breathed heavily, his back throbbing with pain. “What did you say to that bastard?”

Zhou Yu’s heart ached at the sight of Sun Ce’s wounds, but they could not linger here. He had no choice but to pick up Sun Ce and carry him on his back so he could stagger faster down the mountain.

After their escape seemed assured, Sun Ce spoke up from behind Zhou Yu. “Hey.”

“What?” Zhou Yu asked in response. “I hope Hua Xiong doesn’t hurt my father. At worst, I hope he sends him back to Luoyang.”

“I sent my father a message the day I arrived in Shu County. Don’t worry, now that we know what’s going on, everything will be fine.”

“Didn’t you say you came here alone? How did you send a message?”

Sun Ce clung tightly to Zhou Yu’s back and laughed. Zhou Yu was at his wits’ end with this man. How could he laugh at this situation?

They had spent so long in the hideout that the sun had sunk low in the sky. Sun Ce’s breathing grew heavier and heavier. He didn’t have the strength to stay awake anymore, and Zhou Yu felt his weight shift as Sun Ce fell asleep.

Zhou Yu’s heart burned with anxiety. He wanted to go to Shu County to give his report, but Sun Ce was heavy enough without the nearly twenty-pound iron staff he also had to drag along. Their combined weight was exhausting him.

As dusk fell, Sun Ce’s body temperature soared rapidly, but they had no medicine to treat his fever. Zhou Yu decided to lay him down in a nearby hollow to inspect his injuries. Sun Ce was breathing evenly, but his face was slightly flushed. Zhou Yu washed his wounds with clean water from a creek, then went to pick some healing herbs. He’d need to chew them before applying them to Sun Ce’s back.

The sudden, piercing cry of a bird echoed through the hollow. Spreading its wings, a snow-white falcon sped toward them. Zhou Yu couldn’t help but jump in alarm—he had never seen this species around Lake Chao before.

Could Hua Xiong have already discovered their lies and sent out a scouting bird to find them?

The white falcon circled a few times before slowly descending and landing by Sun Ce; Zhou Yu immediately understood and ran over. The falcon opened its beak in warning at Zhou Yu, but Sun Ce stirred and groggily said, “Fei Yu, stop it!”

“Was this bird the one who delivered the message?” Zhou Yu asked.

Sun Ce smiled. “Its name is Fei Yu, and I’ve raised it as a messenger bird since I was a child. I was planning on bringing it along so you could see, but when I arrived at Lake Chao, I felt like something was off, so I sent it away to deliver a message to my father.”

Zhou Yu knelt behind Sun Ce, chewing the herbs. They were extremely bitter, and his entire mouth numbed. Zhou Yu spread the poultice onto Sun Ce's back as Sun Ce removed the message from Fei Yu's claws and handed it over. There was only one line written on the strip of cloth: *Wait on the western bank of Lake Chao. Reinforcements will arrive in a few days.*

Zhou Yu sighed in relief. Even though he didn't know where Hua Xiong was detaining his father, everything would be easier when the reinforcements arrived.

Sun Ce's eyebrows knit in pain. "Is your salve supposed to hurt more than the injury?"

Zhou Yu shushed him. "We don't have time to chat. Let's go."

With that, he slung Sun Ce's arm over his shoulder and led them away from the hollow, fleeing to the northwest bank of Lake Chao.

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Dusk eventually darkened into night. On the western bank of Lake Chao, a group of riders galloped toward them. At their head was a man in his sixties who shouted, "Sun Ce! What trouble have you gotten yourself into this time?"

"General Sun!"

"How did you get beaten like that?!"

"Don't worry about it," Sun Ce replied. "We have to gather the troops and head up the mountain first! General Huang! The situation was too dire so I didn't have time to give a proper report, thus causing all of you trouble. Sorry about that!"

Sun Ce cupped his hands and bowed formally in apology.

"Your dad had a hard time finding you!" the old man gruffly barked.

Fei Yu cried out and took off, circling over the valley in order to scout out the area. A subordinate carried Sun Ce his armor, and as he was putting it on, Sun Ce briefly introduced Zhou Yu to the old man, one of Sun

Jian's commanders. After receiving Sun Ce's letter, he had quickly led his troop of four hundred men to Lake Chao to rescue him.

"Hmm." Huang Gai studied Zhou Yu. "Is Zhou Yi your father?"

"He is indeed my father, venerable general…"

Sun Ce quickly whispered into Zhou Yu's ear. "You'd best not refer to his age. He absolutely *hates* it when people call him old."

Zhou Yu bit his tongue. The words had already left his mouth, so there was no use taking them back.

Huang Gai grunted in annoyance but continued, "What are you two rascals mumbling about? Do you think I can't hear you?"

Sun Ce smiled consolingly at him and made the proper bows of respect before he led Huang Gai up the mountain.

The sky was hung with bright stars, but the moon hadn't risen. Zhou Yu compared the four hundred men Huang Gai had brought with the forces the other side had: Their opponents had a commander as well, and it was likely that if they fought the two sides would forget about the hostages, which could lead to disaster.

Huang Gai harrumphed. "Ah, leave it. Zhou Yu, your father has held his position for many years, and he is an upstanding man. I shall not quibble with a youth. My men are not from Shu County, so they are unfamiliar with these mountain paths. Do you know these roads?"

"I do," Zhou Yu replied. "General Huang, our enemies also have a renowned commander leading them. His name is Hua Xiong, Dong Zhuo's subordinate. Would it not be wiser to wait until later and have the troops launch a night raid instead?"

"Are you looking down on Huang-mou?" Huang Gai demanded angrily. "As if the likes of Hua Xiong would be able to defeat me!"

Sun Ce quickly stepped in. "General Huang, our opponents have taken hostages. Why not hear out Gongjin's plan?"

Zhou Yu's heart tightened with apprehension. This was his first time interacting with a seasoned military man, and Huang Gai's fluctuating temper was hard to grasp.

Still evidently holding him in contempt, Huang Gai chuckled coldly. “Why do we need to wait until later? Sun Ce, you and I shall take the lead and storm in.”

He’d clearly assumed that Hua Xiong’s hundred-odd men would easily succumb to an attack.

“General Huang.” Zhou Yu thought for a moment before speaking. “I think there has been a misunderstanding, as I didn’t intend to imply anything. I am extremely grateful you have come all this way to rescue my father. I believe that in pursuit of that, we can also minimize the number of casualties among our brothers-in-arms, which is why I brought up such a strategy. How could I accept it if others are harmed in his rescue?”

Sun Ce’s expression shifted as he looked at Huang Gai, unsure of what to say.

Surprisingly, the general’s face relaxed. “You make a good point. My soldiers’ lives are highly valued. Let us follow your plan, then. Tell me what you have already come up with.”

Zhou Yu gathered his thoughts, then used a tree branch to sketch out a map of Hua Xiong’s hideout onto the ground. He pointed out the spots to ambush versus attack, where to set down a base of operations, as well as where the hostages were and what paths to block to prevent the enemy from fleeing.

If they were going to do this, they would need to see it through to the end. Should Hua Xiong escape and discover that Huang Gai had assisted them, Dong Zhuo would not let this slide. Zhou Yu had to plan everything meticulously. All that was left now was to wait until it was time for the troops to launch their attack.

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Dark clouds began rolling in as the night deepened, blanketing the stars. Several squads of men crept up the path running alongside the canyon, climbing to higher ground.

Fei Yu flew above in circles, a white dot in the darkness, letting out a screech. Sun Ce reined his horse to a halt and looked at the faraway valley in the distance. Where his eyes fell, feathered arrows shot forth, and the sentries Hua Xiong had posted toppled over without a sound. Huang Gai's assassins—armed with daggers and crossbows—surrounded and ambushed a group of patrolling soldiers.

Inside the camp, Hua Xiong had continued to drink until he was dead to the world and passed out next to the table.

Zhou Yu stood in the dark forest, bronze sword in hand. The flame of his torch gleamed off his blade, sending a flash of light toward the opposite slope. Sun Ce waved in return, signaling the archers to nock their bows. With a blazing torch in hand, Sun Ce swiftly swept past them, igniting the arrowheads.

Sun Ce blew the bamboo whistle, and a meteor shower of fire arrows arced down from the mountain peaks on both sides, descending on the camp situated in the middle of the canyon!

As it hadn't rained in days, and every house in the hideout was built of wood, the buildings swiftly lit ablaze. As they merrily burned, someone shouted in alarm, "Fire!"

"Attack!" Huang Gai demanded with a roar.

Like a horde of heavenly warriors thundering toward the enemy, the Changsha army boldly charged into the camp. The entire canyon fell into chaos while Sun Ce rode his horse westward. To the north, a horse-drawn carriage sped away from the camp.

Seeing the situation devolve, Zhou Yu drew his sword and dashed into the hills instead. He whistled, and the white falcon dropped into sight, guiding him toward the northern side of the camp.

The raging flames engulfed every house in the valley, immolating soldiers in their sleep. Huang Gai rounded his troops up to charge again and again while Hua Xiong's troops could barely grab their weapons before they were scattered.

Amid the inferno, Hua Xiong shouted, "Give your name forth—"

Sun Ce dashed in, ramming his horse straight into Hua Xiong, cutting the words from his mouth. As the commander was still suspended in a drunken stupor, Sun Ce easily bowled him to the ground. He floundered about, trying to find a weapon. All around him, foot soldiers came charging forward, abandoning the battle to push Hua Xiong up onto a horse, leading him in a hasty, dangerous dash out of the canyon.

The battle ended as quickly as it started. However, the fire had spread around the mountaintop, and thick black smoke billowed through the air, catching the attention of fishermen on the banks of the lake.

With sword still in hand, Zhou Yu encountered a group of soldiers attempting to flee.

“You can’t escape!” he shouted.

The head of this group was that ferryman they’d been suspicious of. As soon as he saw Zhou Yu, he ordered his soldiers into a defensive formation, and both sides fell into a pitched battle. Sun Ce rushed over with his troops, decimating their enemies’ morale, and their troops left their opponents’ dead corpses strewn everywhere as they continued to fight.

“Where is my father?” Zhou Yu shouted. “Hand him over!”

Though the ferryman’s face was smeared with blood, his whole body covered in mud, he still laughed coldly.

“You’re too late, Zhou-shaoye[4]…”

“I found it! I found the Zhou family’s carriage!” reported one of Sun Ce’s men.

Zhou Yu wasted no more time interrogating the ferryman, quickly turning to follow the messenger instead.

As dawn broke, they entered a canyon on the northern side of Mount Gu and spotted a bloodied carriage forsaken beneath a tree. The sky was beginning to brighten, but the entire valley was covered in a layer of fog. Zhou Yu dashed through the mist only to see his father on the brink of death, an arrow jutting from his chest.

Zhou Yi was almost in his fifties, his hair and beard streaked with gray. He was coughing with every breath, a steady stream of blood trickling from his mouth.

“Young general,” the messenger said, “Zhou-daren[5] was held captive in the basement of one of the wooden houses inside the camp. When the hideout was captured earlier this night, the enemy troops brought him here, likely in an attempt to flee the mountain. But as we caught up to them, one of the enemy soldiers shot Lord Zhou with an arrow—”

Sun Ce held up his hand, gesturing for the messenger to hush.

Zhou Yu knelt by his father, staring emptily at his face, which seemed older than he recalled.

The dawn sun broke over the mountain, pouring its golden light into the valley.

“Yu-er[6]…Yu-er…” Zhou Yi sighed. “Last night…I heard your voice…just last night, where I was being held captive. I called out, but you…you didn’t hear me.”

“Dad,” Zhou Yu sobbed.

“Don’t cry… You shouldn’t cry.” Zhou Yi’s hacking turned guttural. His nose and mouth overflowed with frothed blood. The arrow had pierced deep into his lungs, and pulling it out would likely kill him on the spot.

“As we all live in this world…so we shall all die,” Zhou Yi gasped. “But fortunately, you’ve come… Your father no longer needs to return to Luoyang and to the service of that false tiger…or to carry out any more unmentionable tasks…

“Take care of your mother,” Zhou Yi continued, pausing to cough. “Ah, and…young man, you…you are…”

“Zhou-shibo,[7]” Sun Ce said, “I’m Sun Ce, Sun Jian’s son, Sun Ce…”

“You’ve…grown up so…” Zhou Yi smiled, pleased. “What a good child.”

He took Sun Ce’s hand and placed it over Zhou Yu’s. Then he calmly shut his eyes for the last time.

Zhou Yu cried in pure agony. He lifted his head to sob openly into the sky. Tears blurred his vision as he stared into the cloudless, clean, endless blue.

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The next day, Zhou Yu brought his father's body back to Shu County and began to prepare for the funeral. He had the body transferred into its temporary resting place, sent out notices, informed friends and family, sat vigil, and decorated the mourning hall appropriately, all while also comforting his mother and grandmother, both of whom were overcome with grief.

He was numb as he set the customary white silk ribbon onto his father's coffin. Various relations, distant and close, as well as several close friends all came to pay their respects. Even the magistrate of Shu County made an appearance. Each and every one of them spoke words of comfort to Zhou Yu, telling him not to grieve too long and to accept this change gracefully.

Zhou Yu could only nod in response, pouring tea and wine for this veritable parade of friends and relatives.

The night of the battle, Hua Xiong took advantage of the chaos to orchestrate his escape, with Huang Gai and his men in hot pursuit. Sun Ce stayed behind to escort Zhou Yu home.

When a group of female relatives cut out a piece of white mourning cloth for Zhou Yu to wear, Sun Ce added, "Allow me a piece as well. My family and the Zhou family have been longtime friends."

The women studied Sun Ce. Though he looked worn by the events of the past few days, his handsomeness and valiance shone through. They held a whispered conference before glancing over at Zhou Yu, sitting frozen in the mourning hall. One of Zhou Yu's younger cousins tied a piece of the mourning cloth around Sun Ce's arm.

Sun Ce helped Zhou Yu see their guests off, holding the staff of mourning, before he sat down by Zhou Yu's side and sighed.

Finally, Zhou Yu spoke. "What are *you* sighing for?"

"I'm sorry," Sun Ce apologized. "I was useless."

Zhou Yu smiled mirthlessly. "How could I blame you? Life and death are fate, Bofu. If you hadn't been here, I might not have made it."

“Nonsense,” Sun Ce protested, torn between emotions. “My mom always says there are no hurdles that cannot be overcome, only good fortune that cannot be enjoyed. You have so much life to live, so you have to take care of yourself.”

A light spring drizzle began to fall.

The two of them sat side by side under the eaves, watching the rain; individual droplets joined into long threads that trailed from the sky to the ground. With every drop that hit the ground and blossomed, more droplets flew aside, birthing more flowerlike spots. The world was dreary and gray, stretching endlessly into the mountains and rivers far in the distance, and beyond that, the night sky.

“Is your mother feeling any better?” Sun Ce asked.

“She’s able to stomach porridge now,” Zhou Yu replied. “But I should check on her.”

Sun Ce’s question was a good reminder, so the two went inside to see Zhou Yu’s mother. She was preoccupied with organizing her late husband’s belongings, and she and several maidservants were moving a collection of dusty, untouched books out of the attic.

“Mother,” Zhou Yu called before heading in.

Madame Zhou nodded at them, first glancing over Zhou Yu before looking to Sun Ce. Despite the great shock and heavy grief she had endured over the past few days, she still managed a smile.

“Ce-er, many thanks for all you have done.”

“I did what anyone would have,” Sun Ce replied. “My father is still in Jiangdu and was unable to come on such short notice, but he did send a messenger with a letter today.”

Sun Ce pulled out said letter and handed it to Zhou Yu’s mother. She smiled as she opened it. The emotions contained within were clear, expressing Sun Jian’s heartfelt concerns and genuine condolences for the deceased.

Madame Zhou asked after Sun Jian’s household, as well as Madame Sun’s health. She had Zhou Yu set brush to paper so he could write down her response. Sun Ce respectfully answered every question she asked of

him. Zhou Yu sat by the window as they spoke, writing down the responses his mother wanted to send to the Sun family.

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The leaves of the banana trees gleamed a verdant green after the rain. In the middle of the night, with the rain continuing to patter on the roof, Sun Ce bared his arms and back to Zhou Yu. Zhou Yu mixed medicinal powder into a paste in a small dish before applying it to Sun Ce's injuries.

The two of them spent a long time together in silence. Eventually, this period of time would become the most cherished memory Zhou Yu had, for the rest of his life. Sun Ce's silent comfort allowed him to endure these days of endless despair. He felt an overwhelming apathy and could barely communicate. No matter what others asked, he didn't know how to respond. In those moments, it was Sun Ce who answered for him.

At night they slept on the same bed. Zhou Yu lay on his back, but Sun Ce could only lie on his stomach because of his wounds. Neither of them spoke. Sun Ce slept deeply, always until daybreak. By the time Zhou Yu woke, Sun Ce was always already busying himself in the mourning hall.

After six days, it was customary to hold a wake for the deceased on the seventh night. However, on the afternoon of the sixth day, several of his uncles and brothers came to visit after lunch. As host, Zhou Yu poured tea for them, and one of his paternal uncles sat down before him.

"Yu-er, we came to ask you about the silk farm and what you're planning to do with the shop."

Realizing this was an internal affair, Sun Ce excused himself to sit off to the side.

Zhou Yu sipped his tea before replying. "Uncles, you have come at just the right time. My mother brought this matter up just yesterday. What are your thoughts?"

The Zhou family owned a silk store and a hundred acres of mulberry fields, which produced enough silk every year to support them. Before Zhou Yi had passed the examinations to become a government official, the

Zhou family's business had been extremely profitable, accounting for a third of the silk trade in Shu County.

After the previous Zhou patriarch died, the inheritance had been split among Zhou Yi and his cousins, and Zhou Yi's branch of the family received a piece of fertile land on the eastern bank of Lake Chao. The Zhou family was composed of many personalities, and after many years some of them had grown prosperous while others wasted time and did nothing, squandering their share. By the time Zhou Yu was born, many members of the family had fallen into the latter category.

That was the same year Zhou Yi passed the examinations and was granted a position, so he went to Luoyang to take up his post as a minor official. Zhou Yu was too young, and there were not suitable closer relatives, so he entrusted the mulberry fields and silk store to a few of his cousins at the time. But now that he had passed, Madame Zhou wanted these lands and the store to be returned to Zhou Yu so he could oversee them.

Zhou Yu was about to say he would take care of the fields and the silk store when unexpectedly, as if his uncles had already come to an agreement beforehand, one of them handed over the ledger book.

"Yu-er, look at this. These are the account books for the last few years."

"Mm," Zhou Yu murmured, flipping through one.

One of his uncles continued, "The silk production of Shu County has declined, year after year. The political turbulence has not helped. In the past, we were enduring by selling silk to Liang Province, then sending the silk westward through the Silk Road thanks to your father's efforts in smoothing over relations at court. But now that we have no representative in the capital, it will require more effort. We old men have put our heads together and would like to hear your opinion."

"My opinion on what?" Zhou Yu asked, raising his eyebrows.

"The way I see it, it's disadvantageous to continue the business right now," chimed in another uncle. "Why not close the silk store? Then we uncles will help you find a buyer to liquidate the mulberry fields into taels,

which will be more than enough to help send you to the capital so you can become a government official. How does that sound?”

“Absolutely not!” Zhou Yu shot back. “I haven’t made up my mind about going to the capital, anyway. Why would we sell off the store now?”

“To tell you the truth,” that same uncle replied, “when your father asked us to help take care of the business, it was not as successful as it was previously. And many of the merchants owe us debts. Some didn’t pay their interest at the end of the year, and others picked up the goods only to be robbed by the Yellow Turban bandits. That very thing happened just a few days ago! Your sixth uncle was taking a shipment to the capital and was robbed blind along the way. He lost a significant amount of money on transportation expenses too. We have all sunk money into your business, *and* your household keeps withdrawing funds from the shop…”

It became clear what they were attempting. Having heard his father was gone and his family was in a weakened state, these people had sprung up to pry the mulberry fields away from them. They were trying to cajole Zhou Yu into selling off the fields to wring some money out of the situation.

“How much is owed?” Zhou Yu asked, before decisively ending the conversation. “Bring your debt certificates here. I must tally up the accounts myself before I pay you back.”

The uncles all glanced askance at each other, taken aback by Zhou Yu’s bluntness.

One uncle mumbled, “I’m quite old; I can’t understand this…”

“Please go back and enjoy your remaining years.” Zhou Yu stood and bowed deeply to his uncles.

Another uncle tried his piece. “Yu-er, there’s no point in keeping the mulberry fields if there is nowhere to sell the silk. Feel free to look through the ledgers. When your father started the storefront, we all supported his endeavor with our silver. When he was alive, we agreed we would get one share each of the store and the mulberry fields. That’s why we helped. They belong to all of us. We also paid for various expenses, like hiring a shopkeeper and sales clerks to keep the records…”

“So?” Zhou Yu asked, looking back up at them. “Do you think selling the fields off is cost-effective?”

“These are troubled times,” an uncle said patiently. “The only real money is what you have in hand, right? Unlikely as it seems, if the Yellow Turban bandits ravage this place too, well… You understand. If they raze the fields, then…”

Sun Ce let out a derisive chuckle. “I see. You all came to bully an orphan and widow out of their rightful inheritance.”

“How dare you!” Zhou Yu’s nastiest uncle shouted, his face burning with anger. “We’ve arduously looked after the store for years! His father promised our shares to us when he was alive. Who do you think you are to interfere?!”

Sun Ce grew incensed in kind, and his reply was cold. “Are you even human? Do you think I’m unaware of your ulterior motives? Several days ago while I was out shopping, I happened upon the silk store. It was bustling! Since when has it been in debt? No matter what Zhou-daren says, words alone are not evidence. Prove you were promised shares with a written contract! Do you really think you can extort someone with some made-up story? Well, I am sorry to inform you that the Zhou family still has friends. Just try and see what happens if you sell the land without Gongjin’s say.”

The group was indignant by that point. Zhou Yu thought for a moment before speaking. “I will keep the ledgers for now. I’ll look over the expenses and revenue of the past few years. If we are deeply in debt, then…”

“You shall go inform the right officials,” Sun Ce finished, giving up on all pretense of politeness. “You should find the county magistrate and figure out how much of the silk store’s revenue has been left off the books and how much has been embezzled.”

“All right, all right…” Zhou Yu replied.

“You little bastard!” roared the same livid uncle, rolling up his sleeves. “You’ve slandered us enough! You’ll learn to treat us with respect!”

Zhou Yu had never introduced Sun Ce after returning home, and everyone assumed he must have been some pampered minor aristocrat. Zhou Yu’s uncle thought he could teach this arrogant kid a lesson after he’d

humiliated him. But Sun Ce was ready. He shot his left foot out, hooking it around a bench's leg to slide it closer.

"Stop!" Zhou Yu shouted.

The man grabbed Sun Ce and was about to strike, but Sun Ce launched the bench into the air with a kick. They'd be offended no matter what happened, so Sun Ce might as well beat them first and deal with the consequences later.

Zhou Yu threw up his hands, though he was also angry. He moved to stop Sun Ce, instead intercepting the bench by accident. With a powerful deflecting blow, he sent it flying, and it struck that uncle squarely in the stomach, blasting him out of the hall.

The rest of them cursed loudly, but Sun Ce grabbed the bench, twirling it in his hands, and none dared to step forward. All they could do was impotently swear as they backed away before turning tail and fleeing.

Sun Ce tossed the ledgers after them.

"Who knows how much money you've cheated the Zhou family of? And yet you dare to split up the fields as well? Hoard your stolen wealth well, you thieves, because the county magistrate is going to give you eighty strikes with a paddle!"

Once the last of them fled, Zhou Yu and Sun Ce glanced at each other, then burst out laughing. Zhou Yu laughed until he cried, leaning up against a pillar for support at first, then slowly sliding down it. When he reached the ground, joy turned to sorrow, and he began to sob.

Sun Ce sat beside him, a hand on his shoulder. After a few moments, his sobs quietened, and his tears stopped. With red eyes, he chuckled bitterly.

***

That night, the close relatives of all his visiting uncles came to their door, hands on hips, cursing Zhou Yu and Sun Ce. Zhou Yu pretended not to hear. Sun Ce, on the other hand, sprawled carelessly in the mourning hall, idly sniped back every now and then in response.

The argument stretched out incessantly before Zhou Yu's patience snapped.

"Are you done? If you want to sever our family relations, then do it! Do *not* darken this doorstep again!"

Zhou Yu's roar shocked everyone into silence. He'd never lashed out in anger before, and they were taken aback.

"All of you get out!" Zhou Yu demanded.

He was also quite stubborn, so he would never compromise with these people.

***

Zhou Yi's funeral procession took place the next day, and the people of Shu County turned out en masse, lining both sides of the path to see him off. The county magistrate also attended. Zhou Yu was crying so hard he could not keep his composure, so Sun Ce accompanied the magistrate, chatting quietly with him in his place. But as they carried the coffin up the mountain, Sun Ce also, stunningly, began to sob.

"Oh, Zhou-laoye!" Sun Ce bawled, shouting at the top of his lungs, his eyes dry. "Your bones are not yet cold and already people are trying to steal your family's lands and business…"

Zhou Yu blinked.

"They are trying to humiliate your widow and fatherless son…"

Sun Ce's overwrought howling dried up Zhou Yu's tears.

"Enough, enough…" he said.

Sun Ce's words were so loud the people watching the funeral procession heard them, along with the Shu County magistrate. The close relatives grimaced and glowered, while unaware distant relatives began to gossip among themselves, pointing and gesturing at the likely culprits. Sun Ce sobbed out a few more times before stopping, satisfied with his impact, and continued accompanying Zhou Yu up the mountain.

***

The next afternoon, Sun Ce and Zhou Yu visited the silk store. Zhou Yu penned an announcement that the business would be temporarily closed, and he paid off the shopkeeper and clerks so he could recruit new staff. The mulberry fields were temporarily warded off-limits, and only a few farmers were allowed to care for the trees in anticipation of next spring, when silkworms could be raised again.

***

Time passed, and summer had nearly come. The peach trees had bloomed throughout Shu County, painting everything in vibrant splendor.

Finally, everything was settled. Zhou Yu and Sun Ce walked side by side back to the manor. Sun Ce looked across the endless, fertile fields to the verdant hills and clear waters surrounding them.

“Gongjin, maybe you actually should sell the fields,” he suddenly said.

“Why?” Zhou Yu asked. “You need the money?”

“If I was asking for some, would you sell them?” Sun Ce joked.

Zhou Yu didn’t hesitate. “If you needed money, I would. Do you?”

Sun Ce waved a hand. “Actually, I was wondering, would you be willing to come to Changsha for a posting? My army is missing a main records keeper. If you come, the two of us can spend every day together, drinking wine and practicing swordplay.”

“No,” Zhou Yu replied.

“Why?” Sun Ce turned, now walking backward, leaving a trail of mud for Zhou Yu to step through.

“‘With my parents here, I shall not wander far,’”[8] Zhou Yu answered frankly.

Sun Ce smiled and finished the quote. "'And if I must wander, it must be for a just cause.' Isn't that how it goes?"

"Wait a bit longer," Zhou Yu said. "I understand, but my father has just passed, and my mother has no one to keep her company here. I'm worried about her health."

Sun Ce knew that, and he had no choice but to agree. A beat later, he spoke. "Yesterday, Fei Yu brought me some news. My dad is urging me to return."

Zhou Yu froze for a moment, an indescribable disappointment growing within him.

"You're leaving already?" he asked.

"He wants help to usurp that thief, Dong Zhuo." Sun Ce returned to walking alongside Zhou Yu. "I also don't want to part with you, which is why I asked. If you're willing, then come with me on my campaign. You're a great fighter, and I can protect you too. You don't need to be on the front line. All I'm asking is for your help with the ledger books and some battle strategies."

"You expect to protect *me*, you reckless, hasty monkey-head?"

"What, you don't believe me? You haven't seen me on the battlefield!" Sun Ce retorted with a smile.

"No, I believe you," Zhou Yu said softly.

That day, he'd witnessed how Sun Ce fought. He had been fierce as a raging tiger, bearing his might down upon all foes. He had been the epitome of a dashing hero.

"If you're worried about your mother, you can bring her along to Changsha," Sun Ce added. "Spending time with my mother may help her recover."

Zhou Yu's determination wavered at that. But with so much family business to deal with, Zhou Yu couldn't just leave and abandon it all. The journey would be long and difficult, and he was afraid the fluctuating climate would weaken his mother further. If he left, he would be giving up the family business.

Plus, although he and Sun Ce were friends, Sun Jian's subordinates—particularly those well-seasoned generals who'd participated in hundreds of battles—might not take to him like Sun Ce did. It was never easy to ingratiate oneself into an established group.

With everything considered, he could not bring himself to say yes.

Sun Ce watched Zhou Yu expectantly. Those hopeful eyes nearly pressured him into agreeing, but he forced himself to say otherwise.

"After some time, maybe."

"When?" Sun Ce asked, stopping.

"When are you leaving?"

"I have to go tomorrow morning."

It was a hard pill to swallow for Zhou Yu. He had planned to take a couple of weeks to settle matters here before asking for his mother's permission to leave with Sun Ce. He hadn't expected his friend's departure to be so urgent, but Sun Ce had already wasted so much time staying at Zhou Yu's side. He was desperately needed in Changsha, so he couldn't stay.

Zhou Yu looked up at Sun Ce, and the two of them stared at each other silently for a long time.

Suddenly, Sun Ce spoke. "Gongjin, I *want* you to come with me. I'm not asking because I pity you."

"You're overthinking it," Zhou Yu replied. "I never thought of it that way. You helped rescue my father and kept me sane. Really, I'm…" Zhou Yu glanced away. "Bofu, you are a man capable of accomplishing great things."

"Really?" Sun Ce laughed. "Quite a few people have said that."

"There you go, running your mouth again," Zhou Yu remarked, emotions mixed anew.

Zhou Yu began to walk away. Sun Ce followed.

"Gongjin, I'm desperately in need of assistance," Sun Ce said earnestly. "I originally came to find you because I wanted to ask for your help, but with everything happening, I couldn't find a good time to bring

this up. If you become my subordinate, whatever great things I accomplish in the future…”

Zhou Yu’s feet came to a stop beneath him.

“Half will be because of you,” Sun Ce finished.

Zhou Yu knew Sun Ce was pledging this to him.

He nodded. “Bofu, I’m sure, eventually, if you’re not a famous general, you will be one of the Three Ministers. I know it. Right now, I’m the issue. I don’t believe in myself.”

“What?” Sun Ce asked, taken aback.

“Give me time,” Zhou Yu said. “Is that fair? When I feel like I’m competent enough to provide assistance, I will find you.”

“How much time do you need?” Sun Ce said, smiling. “Don’t say ten, twelve years. I can’t wait that long.”

“How about…three years?” Zhou Yu ventured.

Sun Ce did not reply. Zhou Yu knew he was reluctant, and he was afraid that Sun Ce wouldn’t be able to wait, so he didn’t press the topic. The two were lost in their own thoughts as they ambled along. Peach blossom petals danced in the wind, and children ran along the embankment between the fields, strings clutched in their hands as their kites soared above.

“Want to go fly kites?” Zhou Yu asked.

Sun Ce nodded, so Zhou Yu bought a kite off one of the nearby peasants. The two of them climbed onto a canopy boat. With the kite in hand, string trailing, Sun Ce launched it into the air toward the mountains, tall smudges of ink in the distance. Zhou Yu sat cross-legged at the bow of the boat, lifting his head in childlike wonder to watch the kite while Sun Ce stood at the stern, string clutched tight.

“All right,” Sun Ce suddenly answered.

Zhou Yu looked back at Sun Ce’s cheerful, bright smile.

“If you say three years, it’ll be three years. You’re this kite. I hold your string in my hand, so you will always come back to me in the end,” Sun Ce said.

Zhou Yu smiled but did not respond. Instead, he took the qin from inside the boat, thought for a moment, then strummed his fingers across the five strings, sending the crisp, clear sound resonating through the air.

***

A curtain of mist blanketed the mountain on the dawn of the next day. Sun Ce and Zhou Yu hadn’t slept, instead lying in bed and talking all night long. Zhou Yu was still yawning when he rose to see Sun Ce off. Sun Ce, on the other hand, was in high spirits when he bade farewell to Zhou Yu, one hand clutching the reins of his horse.

“You can say goodbye here,” Sun Ce said. “Remember. Three years.”

“I remember,” Zhou Yu replied.

The white falcon flew to them and landed on Zhou Yu’s shoulder.

Sun Ce added, “Fei Yu will bring you my letters. Take care of yourself.”

Zhou Yu took a step forward but stopped, overwhelmed by a jumble of feelings. Sun Ce understood and, throwing all concept of restraint out of his mind, pulled Zhou Yu into a tight hug. The two stood on the mountain path, embracing, for a long while.

When the moment felt right, Sun Ce patted Zhou Yu’s back and pushed him away. Without saying anything, he mounted his horse.

“Giddyup!”

In the instant Sun Ce turned around, Zhou Yu saw his eyes were bloodshot, but Sun Ce did not say anything. There was only the echo of horse hooves as his horse galloped along the mountain path before he evaporated into the fog.

Chapter 2:
Becoming

B*IRDCALLS AS THE AUTUMN WIND BLOWS stir my thoughts. Once the sun has risen, I will have made my decision.*[9]

A white falcon glided toward a canopy boat and landed next to a man fishing at the bow. The fisherman wore a bamboo hat and swayed one dangling leg over the boat's edge, foot skimming the surface of the lake.

Another young man slumped lazily nearby, wearing a set of beautifully embroidered robes. His face looked like it was carved from fine jade, and his eyebrows were as delicately outlined as wintertime mountains. His lips were red as cinnabar, his teeth as white as snow, and his eyes as bright as stars.

"Zijing," the fisherman said, "can you check if that's our bird?"

Despite being asked, Lu Su didn't bother opening his eyes. "We came all the way here just to wait for some bird?"

"That's right! Bofu's letter is here!"

The fisherman reeled in his rod and tossed Fei Yu a few fish from his basket. The falcon hopped a few times before fixing its gaze on him. Removing his own bamboo hat revealed Zhou Yu's handsome face beneath.

"'Fei Yu.' 'Sun Bofu,'" Lu Su griped. "Just hearing their names annoys me now. I'm guessing there's still nothing to report, right, Zhou Gongjin?"

"Come here," Zhou Yu said, smiling.

The white falcon hopped over, and Lu Su jabbed a finger at it. He had teased it before, and as soon as it saw his finger coming, it hurriedly flitted away. Lu Su earnestly held out a small fish to lure it over. Tempted, Fei Yu finally cautiously approached him. The corners of Lu Su's mouth curled upward.

"Other falcons eat meat. You're the only one who eats fish," he remarked blithely.

The falcon stared at Lu Su and tilted its head. Zhou Yu idly stroked its feathers.

“Where’s Bofu’s letter?”

Lu Su pulled its foot from under it, untying a small tube from its leg and pulling out the letter inside.

To my dear brother Gongjin:

It has been a few years since we last saw each other. How have you been? In the next few days I shall be leading my troops northward. The majority of Zhang Jue’s power has been stripped, and the chaos of the Yellow Turban Army eliminated, but He Jin has lured the Marquis of Mei, Dong Zhuo, into the capital. Luoyang is unstable. The Liang Province Army is currently garrisoned in Guandong, where it is easy for them to cause trouble should the need arise. On behalf of my father, I shall be leading my family’s seasoned troops to Sikang to keep order. The number of refugees stuck at the foot of the Hulao Pass is increasing; the citizens have abandoned their homes due to the disturbance. I have tried my best to track down the goods you mentioned but to no avail. I know you’ll be nervous, so I wanted to pass this message along first. Brother, do not worry. Worrying will only make mountains out of molehills. Wait for my investigation.

It is two years into our three-year promise, and there is an empty position among my troops waiting for you.

Please pass my regards along to Auntie. Do not miss me too much, brother.

Bofu

“Sure enough, a whole lot of nothing,” Lu Su mercilessly teased Zhou Yu, who was clearly exasperated. “Now you have your letter, and we can go back.”

“You go,” Zhou Yu said. “If only so Sister-in-Law doesn’t scold you again.”

“Oh, shush. The only reason you’re not scolded is because you have no wife to do so, and yet you laugh at me. When are you getting married? You should hurry up, lest all the girls lose their hearts over you,” Lu Su replied, brushing his clothes.

“I want to fish a little longer.”

“Something on your mind?”

“What could be weighing on me? I simply want to fish.”

“And yet your words don’t match your thoughts,” Lu Su declared.

He grabbed a wooden plank lying in the boat and tossed it onto the surface of the lake. Then he vaulted straight off the boat like an arrow from a bow, one hand behind his back and his foot bent slightly. He alighted on the plank, sending ripples spreading halfway across the lake, and skidded to the shore, looking confident and at ease as he landed.

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Zhou Yu’s handsome side profile was reflected in the blue waters of the lake, with the crisp outlines of the mountains behind him. Fishing rod in his hand, he sat motionless, statue-like. It wasn’t until it began to rain, drops hitting the water to form thousands of flowers across the surface of Lake Chao, that Zhou Yu let out a long sigh and picked up the fishing rod and bucket to head home.

Two years had passed since he and Sun Ce parted. Emperor Ling had passed away, and Emperor Xian had ascended the throne. The news from Luoyang grew more and more tense day after day. At first, He Jin lured Dong Zhuo into the capital, and Lü Bu killed Ding Yuan and switched to Dong Zhuo’s side. The citizens of the capital were distressed, and multiple rich aristocratic families had fled the Guandong region.

After that, people claimed Dong Zhuo was a thief who usurped the throne and gained control of Emperor Xian, reigning supreme over the imperial court. Then a rumor spread that well-known warriors had banded together, the revered Yuan Shao at their head, and pledged to topple Dong Zhuo’s reign of terror.

The entire countryside was abuzz with rumors, and even Zhou Yu’s own Jiangzuo region was overshadowed by the strained atmosphere; additional guards had been assigned to patrol the roads recently.

Autumn rain pattered down bleakly, shrouding the mountain ranges in a dark veil. Zhou Yu, wearing his hat and carrying a bucket, walked along the meandering path, the white falcon Sun Ce had gifted him perched on his shoulder.

Over the past two years, they never stopped exchanging letters. From time to time, Zhou Yu would pen Sun Ce a letter, and Sun Ce would respond almost immediately. The exchanges were full of unimportant pleasantries, as if they were reliving the meaningless conversations of their childhood. The letters continued even though the contents mostly mentioned the peach blossoms blooming and withering, the water levels of Lake Chao rising and falling, the changing of the four seasons, and the constant renewal of nature.

It wasn't until half a year ago, at the beginning of spring, that the silk store restarted dispatching caravans. Their trade route stretched through the Hangu Pass toward Liang Province, and from there, continued along the Silk Road to trade with the Western Regions. However, that year the turbulent political situation had grown beyond Zhou Yu's control. Less than three months after the merchants set off on their journey, they sent news—a large amount of cargo had been seized.

That caravan contained not only their silk, but goods from commercial businesses across Shu County. All of it was missing, leaving behind just two mules. These had been returned by the officials who happened to be at the waystation at the same time.

Realizing the turmoil had finally reached their lands, every influential family in Shu County panicked, scattering people to seek information. Despite this, the thirty-six members of that caravan vanished like a stone sinking into the deep sea; no one heard from them.

The goods weren't as important as the missing people. No one knew if they were alive or dead. Not even corpses had been recovered. The workers at Zhou Yu's silk shop were newer employees, but human lives were priceless, so he hastily penned a letter to Sun Ce requesting help.

Sun Ce comforted Zhou Yu, but both knew during this turbulence, people were cast aside like so much chaff, and most likely the entire caravan had perished. If they had someone working in the imperial court as a minor official, they might have been able to inquire after their

whereabouts. Right now, the families of those thirty-six people, orphans and widows, mourned as they clung to fragments of hope.

Zhou Yu dawdled in the misty autumn rain, trying to recall the names of the prominent officials and eminent lords he had met back when his father was in Luoyang. Maybe he could write a letter to them…but in the chaos Dong Zhuo had roused when he entered the capital, they would be hard-pressed to guarantee the safety of their own lives, let alone spare any effort to help others.

The sky grew dark as he climbed the mountain. Zhou Yu hesitated for a long while before he knocked on the temple door.

“Master Zhijing,” Zhou Yu said, “allow me to borrow a lantern.”

The wooden door opened with a creak, and a young acolyte appeared.

“The great master welcomes your presence for a cup of tea and a warm place by the fire, Zhou-lang.”

Zhou Yu smiled. “Letting others call me Zhou-lang is fine, but why should you?”

He warmly grazed his finger down the acolyte’s cheek before setting his fishing rod down and removing his bamboo hat. Without waiting for further permission, he stepped into the temple.

Inside, an old monk was grinding down a brick of tea. His white brows and hair framed his eyes. Zhou Yu walked in silently. He sat in the corridor, his body still permeated with the chilly autumn wind and rain that swept across the mountain.

Zhou Yu’s father came to Mount Gu often when he was still alive to play qi[10] against this old monk. After Zhou Yi bade farewell to the world, Zhou Yu would come to visit occasionally. He’d always arrive empty-handed, and they would never talk. The old monk practiced the teachings of the Mute Chan, which dictated that one should speak little and act more, and the monk was a devoted practitioner. Once in a while, he would glance significantly at someone. If they understood, they understood, but if they were unable to perceive the meaning in his glance, he wouldn’t explain.

Boiling hot tea flowed into the ceramic cup in front of Zhou Yu. The mountains were quiet, the green pines on the slopes rustling softly. Zhou Yu

loved this place because he could speak freely, or not even speak at all. If he wanted to, he could talk; if he didn't want to, he could just sit there, drink tea, and stare into space.

"How did the great master know I would come today to have prepared a cup for me?" Zhou Yu thought about it for a moment before answering his own question. "It's probably because Lu Zijin crossed the threshold of this temple before me."

"You two are like man and shadow—where one goes, the other is not far behind." The young acolyte smiled as he stepped forward. "When Lu-gongzi came by earlier, he wheedled his way into a cup of tea as well. The cup that Zhou-lang will use is the exact one he drank from earlier. We can wash one less and spare ourselves some effort."

Zhijing handed the cup to Zhou Yu, who respectfully received it with both hands. The young acolyte walked into the hallway, sliding the paper doors closed behind him. As the dull sliding sound died away, the yellow lighting turned Zhou Yu and Zhijing into dark silhouettes on the paper screens.

"No news has come yet from the merchants who traveled toward the Silk Road," Zhou Yu sighed. "If Father was still an official in Luoyang, perhaps Shu County wouldn't be in such dire straits now."

Zhijing listened quietly to Zhou Yu's words. He did not cast any judgment. All he did was lift the teapot and add more tea to Zhou Yu's cup.

Zhou Yu continued, "When I compare myself to my late father, the difference is vast…" As he spoke, his shadow hunched in on itself, and a note of self-reproach entered his voice. "I am unable to quell the worries of my mother and neighbors."

The wind swept through the mountains, and thousands of pine trees swayed and creaked. Zhijing poured a third cup. Zhou Yu drank. He was silent for a moment.

"Great Master, I'm considering traveling to Luoyang in a few days' time."

Zhijing's only response was to glance at Zhou Yu.

The little acolyte pulled the paper door open.

“Zhou-gongzi, it’s time to head down the mountain. It is growing late,” he said politely.

The young acolyte turned to gather some items. Zhou Yu set the empty cup upside down on the table, thinking for a few moments.

He spoke hesitantly. “I am a normal person. I have not passed the government examinations, nor do I hold any power in the capital. Autumn is coming, and my aging mother is afraid of the cold, which makes me worry about her… Ah!”

The young acolyte startled him as he walked over, a bag of medicinal herbs in his left hand and a lantern in his right. “Crush this medicine into paste for the old madam. Zhou-gongzi, after you.”

Zhou Yu hugged the medicine to his chest. “No need to see me off.”

As he spoke, Great Master Zhijing stepped into the corridor, slipping on his wooden clogs. He took the lantern from the young acolyte’s hand and signaled for Zhou Yu to go first, indicating that he would see him down the mountain.

It was possible that today Zhijing might dispense wisdom to Zhou Yu and give him advice. The Mute Temple on Mount Gu rarely had visitors, and even if they were a person of high standing or some great landowner, Master Zhijing could easily shut the door in their face. This old master of the Mute Chan had never even seen off renowned scholars. This was an unprecedented first.

“Great Master, you first.” Zhou Yu hurried to bow respectfully.

Zhijing strode forward, his worn monk’s robes fluttering in the autumn wind. He carried the lantern, leading the way into the curtain of thin raindrops. Zhou Yu followed silently.

The mountain road was as dark as pitch, and the only spot of light was Zhijing’s lantern. Zhou Yu’s thoughts wandered, but in the end he couldn’t resist opening his mouth. “Does the great master have any words he wishes to impart?”

Zhijing’s footsteps were his only response. The bright lamp cast their shadows across the mountain’s face and shone through the pine grove to

spread over the ink-black land. He led Zhou Yu straight to the foot of the mountain, not too far from the hubbub of Shu County.

Zhijing handed the lantern over to Zhou Yu, who stood there dumbly. The monk put his hands together, fingers interlaced and palms pressed together, as he bowed in farewell to Zhou Yu.

“Great Master…”

But then Zhijing made another movement Zhou Yu had never expected. In a formal gesture of immense respect from the Chan school, he knelt, kowtowing to Zhou Yu.

“Great Master!”

Zhou Yu was at a loss and about to return the gesture, but Zhijing rose. With a quick turn, the long sleeves of his monk’s robes fluttering, he left, not turning back for a moment.

Lantern in hand, Zhou Yu stood in front of the main gate to the monastery at the foot of the mountain, complex emotions coursing through him. Was Zhijing’s intention that he should travel, or was there another meaning?

It wasn’t until the chill crept into him that Zhou Yu finally turned homeward, taking hesitant step after hesitant step. As soon as he entered the estate, the household servants rushed forth, exclaiming how they had anticipated him all night. The ones in charge of fire tending went to kindle one, and the ones in charge of tea brewing started steeping, kick-starting a flurry of activity.

Zhou Yu heard the commotion but didn’t react to any of it. It wasn’t until he had changed into a clean set of robes that his mother rushed out with a reproach on her lips.

“Where did you run off to? You were gone so long we were worried to death!”

Zhou Yu broke a flatbread apart with his hands and fed it to Fei Yu before explaining. “I took a stroll up the mountain.”

“Did you go see old monk Zhijing?” Madame Zhou asked.

He nodded. Madame Zhou sat down across from her son, a low table between them.

“Bofu sent a letter,” Zhou Yu said.

His mother looked over the letter before saying, “He has put in a great effort. You’re mistreating him, making him run around at your beck and call all day.”

“Bofu did investigate,” Zhou Yu protested, “but he didn’t manage to find any additional information. It is likely he will not find a solution either.”

Madame Zhou sighed, frowning with worry. Zhou Yu pulled out the bag of medicine he was carrying.

“Great Master Zhijing and I chatted for a while.”

“Back when your father was with us,” Madame Zhou said, “that monk treated you very well. Before he chose to take the path of the Mute Chan, he said that your future accomplishments would rival your father’s.”

Zhou Yu jumped, but he didn’t dare meet his mother’s gaze.

Madame Zhou finally noticed the medicine. “What is this?”

“The medicine Master Zhijing prescribed you.” Zhou Yu opened the parcel.

Madame Zhou looked it over. “This medicine was meant for you, wasn’t it? I am not ill.”

Curiously, the little bag contained only a few herbs. He brought it closer to the light to inspect its contents.

“Isn’t that one wangbuliuxing?” Madame Zhou asked.

Zhou Yu fell silent. Finally, he understood Great Master Zhijing’s message.

A piece of brown wrapping paper containing three kinds of herbal medicine: zhimu, yuanzhi, and wangbuliuxing.[11]

“Wangbuliuxing…” Zhou Yu murmured.

Madame Zhou did not understand the meaning hidden in these medicines, nor did she know of the great gesture of respect Zhijing had performed at the gates of the monastery. It was a silent request: He must go to Luoyang to resolve the mayhem across the land and bring peace to the populace. A message telling him to go save all those living in this world.

Madame Zhou looked toward the corridor, seeming to sense his thoughts. “Yu-er.”

“Yes…yes?” Zhou Yu looked up at his mother.

“How much longer are you planning to stay at home, keeping your old mother company?”

“Mother, I worry about you—”

“Over these past few days,” Madame Zhou said, cutting him off, “Mother was constantly wondering if it would be better to arrange a marriage so you could take a wife, settle down, run the silk store, and raise children, or if I should follow your father’s wishes and urge you to spend your effort on the world instead.”

Tears welled in Zhou Yu’s eyes.

“That year,” Madame Zhou said, “I asked if you wanted to go with Bofu to Changsha. You said there were too many family affairs requiring your attention, and you would be in mourning for three years and would not travel far. But Mother knows what your reasoning was.”

Zhou Yu didn’t speak, and Madame Zhou continued, “As of today, the business has come to a halt. With how I see it, the store should be closed soon anyway. If you keep waiting, you will have wasted your youth here in this backwater.

“When your father was alive, he forced you to study so hard so you would leave Shu County,” Madame Zhou said as she rose. “As for the rest, Mother does not need to say more. Do as you see fit.”

Zhou Yu lifted his head, watching as his mother walked away.

***

Later that night, Zhou Yu knelt in the courtyard and kowtowed three times, with great respect and diligence, in the direction of his mother’s room, though she was nothing more than a shadow cast onto the window.

Long after Zhou Yu rose and left, the door slid open with a creak.

***

Days later, in front of a mist-shrouded mountain stream, Zhou Yu rode along, sword strapped to his back and a satchel tied to his hip. He and Lu Su were traveling along the bank of Lake Chao toward Mount Gu.

“Zijing! No need to see me any further!” Zhou Yu reined his horse, shouting back at Lu Su. “I’ll go to Luoyang first to appraise the situation. You should go back!”

“No, no,” Lu Su replied, “I’d better return and give them a heads-up, then go with you. No matter which angle I look at you from, you resemble a feral dog. That’s not a great look.”

Zhou Yu smiled. “When I’m not around, my mother’s in your care.”

Lu Su’s forehead wrinkled slightly as he frowned. “You think you’ll make it work?”

Zhou Yu waved his hand, still smiling.

“Now that you’re off to see your Bofu, your face is beaming with joy,” Lu Su remarked.

Realizing he appeared too outwardly happy, he adopted a solemn expression. “In all seriousness, I’m going to Luoyang to find out which direction the wind is blowing…”

“Go, quickly,” Lu Su said. “Stop explaining. The sun is about to set.”

Zhou Yu sighed, and Lu Su tossed a heavy bag over to him.

“Keep it on you!” Saying this, he chirruped for his horse to turn. He remembered something else and stopped for a moment. “When you see Sun Bofu, give him my regards.”

“Zijing!” Zhou Yu called. His back to him, Lu Su cocked his head slightly in recognition. Zhou Yu continued, “Tell the family members of the merchants that they shouldn’t worry. I’m on it.”

“Return safely,” Lu Su replied. “No matter what, be well.”

“Jia!”

“Jia!”

The two horses separated and headed off in different directions; one returning to Shu County, the other toward Mount Gu, the distance between them growing as the mist continued to rise.

“Jia!”

Zhou Yu’s voice had a note of uncontrollable joy in it as he raced through Mount Gu.

“Jia!”

The autumn sky above was vast, and yellow leaves covered the ground. The falling leaves on either side of the main road danced wildly on the wind as far as the eye could see. The fields were swath upon swath of golden yellow, as if the qi board of the heavens and earth had been covered with a bright, woven carpet.

“Jia!”

Mountains sped by and rivers flowed merrily away as he left Yang Province behind, heading toward the Lu River.

***

One early morning, many days later, Zhou Yu managed to catch the first ferry of the day that crossed the torrential river. After landing on the other side, he didn’t stop, continuing north through Xiapi County before turning west. The distance between him and Sikang shrank smaller and smaller, and the wild shrubbery, weeds, and fields that’d been left fallow increased as he rode on.

Several days later Zhou Yu, who had been sleeping outdoors, knelt on the banks of a creek, lifting some water in his cupped hands to wash his face and rinse his mouth. That was until he looked up and saw a corpse drifting on the flow of the stream. Sword wounds covered it.

Zhou Yu remained silent as another body floated downstream.

He emptied the waterskin he had just filled and led his horse away, one hand on the hilt of his sword. A few miles later, he came across corpses

of citizens scattered along both sides of the road, their bones clearly defined through the skin. They had starved to death.

“Study medicine? Become a doctor and cure people’s illnesses?” His father’s words resounded in his ears.

“Though you may be able to save people that way, you will not be able to save the world.

“Study the arts instead, and become a scholar.

“What you are curing then is the world, and who you are saving are the people.”

As a youth, he hadn’t understood the meaning of those words, and back then he had turned to look in the direction of the splendor of Luoyang, the dazzle of Yang Province, enriched by bamboo and silk, with thousands of lanterns hanging everywhere.

“I see these, these, and those… Aren’t they all pretty nice?” little Zhou Yu asked.

“After you grow up, you will understand,” Zhou Yi sighed, stroking his beard and shaking his head indulgently.

***

The year Dong Zhuo invaded the capital, there was a famine. Emaciated bodies of those that starved to death were strewn across the wilderness, and their corpses littered the streets. As Zhou Yu crossed the desolate land, he forgot his initial burst of giddiness and satisfaction from leaving home. His heart was heavy, burdened, and welled with an inexplicable emotion. He could remember Sikang and Hongnong from when he had come with his father to the capital as a child; they were nothing like this.

Not even ten years had passed. How had things declined so quickly?

Zhou Yu rode along, wandering alone on the main road, hesitation in his heart. This strange world was no longer the Hongnong he had known. The villages where he and his father had rested their feet eight years ago

during their travels were burned to ash. The humans had fled, and buildings stood empty.

He needed to find Sun Ce's armies as soon as possible. Having finally realized the severity of the situation, Zhou Yu spurred his horse westward, endeavoring to find Sun Ce before night fell. But just as he curved around a mountain pass, he heard the distant sounds of slaughter.

Despite the darkening sky, it was easy to make out the blood flowing in rivulets across the ground, down the bank of the stream. It was a startling sight, shocking Zhou Yu. The entire stream was dyed a purplish black, and it was obvious the participants had spent all day fighting.

On one side of the battlefield were soldiers clad in black armor, their opponents in white helmets with red tassels. As a result of the fierce conflict, their white armor had grown dingy and dirty. The black-armored troops raised long blades and slashed down. These dancing weapons forced the white troops toward the stream. Several times, Zhou Yu considered helping the white-armored warriors, but those on the offense were skilled. Heading into this fight alone would be dangerous.

Zhou Yu couldn't see either side's standards, so he directed his horse to the outskirts of the fight, searching for any sigils that would identify either of their commanders. The troops in white were driven back, and the ground ran red with their blood. They were being forced into the stream itself. The black-armored troops' battle formation changed, assembling into one long line. Clearly they were well disciplined.

As Zhou Yu watched on, it was as if there were an invisible thread connecting those thousands of people together as they charged to break through their enemy's defenses. Though there was no flag for the commander, every one of the troops knew exactly where their leader was. This group of men was among the most highly trained he had ever seen. It was this that finally decided Zhou Yu's thoughts, and he spurred his horse into a charge.

At the same moment, the white troops launched their counterattack, the soldiers storming forward, shouting battle cries. Their calls held northern accents, and along with the fact their warhorses weren't the same they used in the south, Zhou Yu realized he should retreat. However, the other side noticed him, and a dozen people rushed after him in hot pursuit.

In his heart, Zhou Yu cried out, *What are you chasing me for?!*

He wheeled his horse around, rushing toward the black-armored soldiers. The two sides were locked in the heat of battle, and neither would ever have expected anyone to charge in between them. With the growing darkness of the evening, Zhou Yu's actions had churned the entire battlefield further into chaos.

"Who is that?" asked the black-armored commander. Tall and lithe, currently astride his horse, he clamped his legs about its flanks and then waved his long halberd. He'd rushed forward only to see some random hothead, with his stumbling, unintentional progress, blundering right into his battle formation.

One of his subordinates shouted, "Zhugong! We don't know who that is!"

"Pull back!" their leader called.

The black-armored troops retreated like the tide, while the white troops pursued Zhou Yu, a coiling snake winding up to strike. Zhou Yu unsheathed his sword as he galloped away. With a clang, the sound of the ancient sword Chijun shivering against its sheath—a dragon's roar—rang out, echoing through the twilit mountain valleys.

"What an amazing sword!" the leader of the black-armored troops cried in admiration.

Zhou Yu could not respond, as the white-armored soldiers had already caught up to him. One of them jabbed at him with a spear. He slid sideways to dodge, slinging even further, to hang under his horse, before flipping back up swiftly from the other side. As he returned upright, his sword flashed with a cold light. A clink sounded, and the sliced tip of the spear flew away.

"Excellent!" The black-armored troops thundered with applause.

Zhou Yu's forehead was drenched in sweat. Several more of the white-clad soldiers raced forward, their long spears blocking his escape. Zhou Yu leaped up, his martial robe fluttering, and swung his sword. In midair, he pivoted, bringing his blade around in an elegant circle, before vaulting backward, clearing the points of the spears. Landing one foot onto his horse's head, he executed another clean, easy backward somersault,

dodging out of reach. The warhorse let out a long neigh, but it continued to gallop onward.

Zhou Yu’s silhouette swept past the troops as he landed back on the horse.

He had managed to slip the net, advancing a number of steps away.

That lithe, tall commander of the black-armored troops lifted his helmet, revealing a pair of sharp, bright eyes. As he sank his halberd into its holder on his back, he retrieved an arrow before nocking it to his bow.

He shouted, “Get him!”

The black-armored troops scattered like disturbed ants, and the silhouette of the powerful commander against the crimson red backdrop of the dying sun reflected in Zhou Yu’s eyes. Light glinted off the tip of the arrow.

The white-armored soldiers charged forward, arrows flying like hornets toward them. Even if Zhou Yu could split himself into a thousand pieces, he had no way to avoid this hail of arrows. Allowing fate to run its course, he flattened himself against the back of his horse, squeezing his eyes shut.

Both sides loosed a rain of arrows simultaneously. The black-armored commander mechanically reached back, pulled out an arrow, nocked it, loosed it, and pulled another, all in a fluid motion. With the ethereal grace of an illusion granted by its speed, his first arrow intercepted another headed for Zhou Yu, splitting its shaft straight down the center. A second arrow threw the soldier right behind Zhou Yu off his horse. The third, the fourth, and the rest of the arrows showered like a downpour across the sky. The white-clad troops, men and horses alike, crashed to the ground.

The black-armored soldiers shouted as they rushed forward, unstoppable as a tidal wave. Sensing their incoming defeat and now too weak to defend themselves, the white-clad group launched their last charge, and the black-armored troops met them in kind. In the middle of the battle, Zhou Yu found himself jostled around as he attempted to control his horse. A sudden tightening on the back of his collar turned into a yank, and a powerful arm lifted him into the air.

“What is a scholar doing here?” Their leader’s voice was cold.

Zhou Yu began to struggle. “General, please have mercy! I am—”

Before he finished, the commander flattened his palm and struck Zhou Yu’s neck with the side of his hand. Zhou Yu’s vision went black, and he fell backward onto his horse, unconscious. The black-armored commander placed Zhou Yu behind him on his own horse.

“Men, retreat!” he roared.

A gong sounded in an answering rhythm of his command. The white-clad troops had already withdrawn into the wilderness, too tired to keep fighting, but the black-armored group still raced behind, not yet satisfied. Some still goaded their enemy to fight back, either through continuously loosing curses or arrows.

***

In the depths of night, one section of the mountain range glowed brightly as a forest of torches flooded into the main camp of the black-armored troops.

A bucket of water was poured over Zhou Yu’s head.

Zhou Yu woke. The strike hadn’t been very forceful, but it had been very precise. It was clear the man saw something in him, so he had been merciful.

He looked up. The commander had already changed into a black robe and was leaning against one side of his seat in a careless sprawl. One of his long, slender fingers was digging around in his ear, and though his mannerisms seemed lazy, he radiated an aura of danger.

He had to be over seven feet tall. His eyebrows were as sharply defined as a sword’s blade, and his nose was high and arching. His lips, pressed sternly together, looked carved from stone, and the side profile of his face was craggy, reminiscent of the people of Xubei. There was a hint of an azure jade in the hooded irises of his deep-set eyes. Overall, he was very well-built, his taotie martial robe highlighting his broad shoulders, his long legs leading to bare feet.

“State your full name and why you are here, in full detail,” he said indifferently.

As he noticed the jade authorization tally dangling from his waist, Zhou Yu’s heart pounded.

“This young one is called Zhou Yu, courtesy name Gongjin.” Zhou Yu knew this man was not one he could afford to offend, both because of his martial skills and the outfit he was clad in.

“Yu is as fine as jade,” the general remarked casually, his gaze sinking away from Zhou Yu. “And beautiful jade fears being broken, so why come to this battlefield filled with troops and horses? Do you really admire this marquis so much?”

“Well…” Zhou Yu didn’t know how to react, so cupped his hands together in a salute. “This unseasoned man was originally heading to Luoyang to visit a friend and accidentally stumbled into the general’s formation.”

The general finally turned, looking Zhou Yu over before staring straight into his eyes.

“Visiting a friend?” the martial general asked, lifting his eyebrows incredulously. “Gao Shun, bring this brat’s sword here.”

A captain brought Zhou Yu’s sword in, offering it up with both hands. Upon hearing the name Gao Shun, Zhou Yu felt a sudden chill. He’d heard this name somewhere before. *Gao Shun, Gao Shun, Gao Shun… Wasn’t Gao Shun under that one man’s command…*

No matter whom he met, nobody could beat the shock of meeting the man in front of him! This was Lü Bu! Lü Fengxian! Zhou Yu had heard of him long ago, even in Shu County. It was rumored his eyes could shoot lightning, his body was surrounded by a mist of blood, and he was fully capable of killing even his own father and brothers. His thoughts were cruel and poisonous, and he was a shortsighted, petty man who rejected the important things in life.

But the person in front of him didn’t look like the General of the Household, Lü Bu, who had crossed and killed Ding Yuan to pledge his allegiance to that Dong thief.[12] When Zhou Yu was younger, he often

listened to the debates held by the cultivators living throughout Shu County, and he knew a person's thoughts were reflected in their appearance. Their temperament would have influence on their visage. Narrow-minded, petty people would have eyebrows that joined together, and those with tilted, triangular eyes often schemed.

But Lü Bu was a handsome man whose martial skills far surpassed any ordinary person's. Zhou Yu could not find it in him to connect this calm, relaxed general to the dark, evil, petty perpetrator of cruel and vicious actions that he was vilified as in legends.

"The famed sword Chijun." Lü Bu spread his palm, and Gao Shun reverently placed the ancient sword in his hand.

"It was created by the great master Ou Yezi," Lü Bu drawled, "and measures almost three feet long. Its body is crafted from a metal that came from outside the heavens. Its grip is made from flaming bloodwood, and the ripple patterns on the blade were crafted by flame. The fire of the south defeats the metal of the west, and the greatest flame of the south, the Nanmingli Fire, will eventually return to its rightful owner, the state of Chu. During the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods,[13] the Zhenguo Swordmaster of Chu, Wu Zixu, took his own life with this very sword."[14]

Zhou Yu nodded in praise. "Commander Lü has a keen eye."

Lü Bu's words inspired a wave of heartfelt admiration in Zhou Yu, no matter how low his opinion of the man had been before due to the rumors he had heard. Lü Bu seemed to love weapons; otherwise he wouldn't have known as much about famous historical swords as if they were his family treasures.

"Wu Zixu asked his people to hang his head from the city walls," Lü Bu said, narrowing his eyes, "so he could watch as the country of Chu fell. The Chijun Sword vanished after that. It reappeared thirty years later and was named the heirloom of the Chu state. Somehow, it was lost in the annals of history and remained hidden for years. Sixteen years ago, a man found the Chijun Sword once again, in Changsha.

"How are you related to the Sun family?" Lü Bu asked. "If I am not mistaken, the person I am thinking of is your father."

Zhou Yu never knew a single sword would give anyone so much information about his family's history. Who was it that said Lü Bu had brawn but not brains?!

"You must be Liu Biao's son," Lü Bu stated firmly.

A look of despair writ itself across Zhou Yu's face.

"Marquis," he responded earnestly. "You've, um, guessed wrong."

"Oh?" Lü Bu was baffled. "Who are you, then?"

Zhou Yu blinked.

He didn't know why, but Zhou Yu wanted to break out into explosive laughter. However, even if this bastard's guess was wrong, his martial skills were nothing to scoff at. If he laughed, Lü Bu could cut him down for it, which wasn't exactly worth the price.

"This junior is named Zhou Yu," he said. "My father, now passed, was the commandant of Luoyang, Zhou Yi."

Zhou Yu described his father's various achievements in detail, leaving out details regarding Hua Xiong. The only thing he mentioned about it was how his father had died during the Yellow Turban Rebellion three years ago. Zhou Yu was afraid if he mentioned his family's relationship with the Sun family, he would put himself in a dangerous position should Lü Bu and Sun Jian be enemies. He managed to gloss over the origins of the sword.

"Since that's how it is," Lü Bu said, "your family has held that government role for three generations, so you must have connections in Luoyang. Ah well, this marquis will do you a favor at little cost to himself and bring you into the city."

Zhou Yu let out a breath in relief. "Yu[15] will never forget the marquis saved his life. What can this one do for the general?"

Sun Jian had joined the Coalition Against Dong while Lü Bu was under Dong Zhuo's command. Zhou Yu and Sun Ce were in the same camp as Sun Jian. With the way things were, Zhou Yu was enemies with the person in front of him, and yet, without knowing why, he couldn't bring himself to dislike Lü Bu.

“Let me think.” Lü Bu pondered for a while. “Come play a game of qi with me. That bastard Cao Cao never plays, so I get bored.”

Zhou Yu happily laid out the board, and the two of them faced off. The match stretched well into the night. In the beginning, Lü Bu was careless, but as it grew late, he played seriously. Eventually Lü Bu indulged in some wine, and in the middle of their game, he waved his hand to indicate he was finished playing. He lay down on his bed, ignoring Zhou Yu entirely. The moment his head was down, he fell asleep.

Zhou Yu put away the pieces. He exited the tent to find Gao Shun waiting there.

“Please come with me,” he said.

Zhou Yu nodded, knowing that at least for today he would be safe. He followed Gao Shun. “I hear that the Changsha prefect Sun Jian’s troops __”

“Do you know the Sun family?” Gao Shun interrupted.

Zhou Yu hesitated. It would be inconvenient for him to reveal his connection with Sun Ce. “If I may ask Commander Gao, are the marquis and Sun Jian…”

“No,” Gao Shun replied. “Never mind.”

Gao Shun avoided responding directly, and Zhou Yu also managed to miraculously sidestep it, the two of them thus coming to a tacit understanding. Gao Shun brought Zhou Yu to a tent and let him rest.

***

The night passed, and before the sky lightened to herald the new day, Lü Bu’s black-armored troops had already packed up camp. There was not a single leaf out of place as the soldiers took down their tents, rolled up their bedrolls, and led their horses away.

Zhou Yu’s eyes were still hazy with sleep, since he was unaccustomed to such an early morning. The troops brought him breakfast and ate with him. Zhou Yu carefully asked around, and he learned Lü Bu

was here to slow the pace of the coalition's troops. The unlucky white-armored army he had attacked was under Commander Gongsun Zan.

Yuan Shao and his group of fighters had formed the Coalition Against Dong, and though they claimed to be fighting back to punish the traitor to the country and restore the emperor to his throne, they had insidiously installed Gongsun Zan as the vanguard. Gongsun Zan lacked fighting spirit, and in this very first battle, he slammed right into the iron wall of Lü Bu's skills. After both sides hacked at each other for a day and a night, Gongsun Zan couldn't stave off their enemy any longer and sent a messenger to request assistance from Yuan Shao, but none of his allies had arrived.

The soldier describing the situation exaggerated Lü Bu's valor, inflating his involvement greatly, and the corners of Zhou Yu's mouth twitched as he listened. It was evident these troops idolized their commander.

Zhou Yu traveled with the black-armored troops as they started and stopped. He felt safe enough but worried about Sun Ce being in danger. As of now, Dong Zhuo was the most powerful player in this war, and Lü Bu had even killed his own adoptive father Ding Yuan to ally with him. Sun Jian's coalition was nothing more than a loose gathering of sand, and Zhou Yu was afraid this battle would be hard won.

They made it to Hongnong County, which meant that Luoyang wasn't far off. Three days of travel later, the army arrived at the capital, and amid the thick of troops, Zhou Yu sneaked into the city. Thankfully, no one stopped them to ask for travel documentation. There were strict inspections underway, screening most people who entered the city, and Zhou Yu was lucky he encountered Lü Bu. All his effort would've been wasted otherwise.

After entering the city, Gao Shun led the troops toward the barracks in the north. Zhou Yu stopped, and a division leader came over to him.

"Commander Lü has given his orders. You no longer need to follow us. Go about your own business."

Zhou Yu wanted to personally thank Lü Bu, who would probably savor the gratitude despite his status. However, the division leader who

brought the message was benevolent and added, “If you run into any difficulties, come by the general’s camp and give us a shout.”

“Thanks.” Zhou Yu’s heart was conflicted. It was clear the two of them were enemies, but at such a critical moment, Lü Bu had been extremely helpful.

After Zhou Yu saw the troops off, an autumn breeze blew by as he stood alone in front of the bronzesmiths’ street. Suddenly, he felt at a loss.

He’d traveled to the capital once as a youth, but over a decade had passed since then. Zhou Yu couldn’t temper the happiness he felt; he’d left Shu County behind and was heading into a brave new world. If he hadn’t set out like he had, he would’ve remained ignorant, and he would never have seen the world as it existed outside of Jiangnan.

Compared to ten years ago, Luoyang was greatly changed. The most obvious difference was the lack of people, and those walking through the streets did so warily, as if they were on high alert. A flock of crows cawed in the distance before they took flight toward the palace. The streetside stalls were already closed for the day.

Zhou Yu racked his brain. What should he do first? Should he stay at an inn for the night or seek out Sun Ce? It was still early in the day.

Back in the day, his father had a number of good friends in Luoyang, and there was one named Qiao Mao. When Zhou Yi bade farewell to this world, the Qiao family sent an envoy with a customary gift of money, so Qiao Mao could aid him in his journey. Qiao Mao had held the position of the governor of Yan Province in the past, but now he was the prefect of Dong Commandery. Zhou Yu asked for directions as he went, and upon learning Qiao Mao was still in Luoyang, he mounted his horse and headed toward the western part of the city.

As he rode by, people gathered to stare curiously at him. Zhou Yu was wearing the clothes of the Jiangnan region, and his features didn’t match those from the Central Plains, so some attention was natural. He could only spur his horse forward despite his trepidation.

The main gates of the Qiao manor were shut tight, and a few bare branches of persimmon trees jutted out over the garden wall. Outside, yellow leaves filled the entire alley; evidently no one swept there.

Zhou Yu knocked on the door a few times, but no one responded. He circled around to the back door and shouted, with the same result. Near the back gate, he did see worn-in tracks, indicating someone had lived here for a long time. The house did not seem empty.

“Prefect Qiao!” Zhou Yu shouted again.

The courtyard remained silent, and a sense of foreboding grew over Zhou Yu. Had Qiao Mao’s family been murdered? He hesitated for a moment but in the end decided to take the risk and climb up onto the wall.

He pressed himself against it and leaped. As he did, his mind suddenly turned to Sun Ce, the thoughts making him emotional. If Sun Ce were here right now, he would have already vaulted over. As he was imagining Sun Ce’s actions, he reached the top, and what he saw below startled him. There were people in the courtyard!

Two old men, their hair and beards graying, sat underneath a tree, playing qi. Zhou Yu’s gaze swept over that qi board; these men were both masters. What was going on? Wasn’t Qiao Mao away?

Just as Zhou Yu was about to retreat and try the door again, he unintentionally bumped into a tree branch, the noise attracting attention.

“Who’s there?!”

One of the old men had a sharp gaze despite his age, and he quickly set his eyes upon Zhou Yu. Startled, Zhou Yu trod forward on the branch. It snapped, sending him plummeting down from the persimmon tree straight into the qi board, flipping it and scattering the pieces.

“Ah!”

The two old men rushed around frantically while Zhou Yu, who hadn’t expected anyone to be in the yard, hurried to rise, scuffed from his confrontation with the ground. The first old man was incandescent with rage, and he upended the qi board over Zhou Yu’s head.

“Where did this unruly swine come from?!”

Desperate to ameliorate the trouble he was in, Zhou Yu flurried about, alternating between cleaning up the qi board, dusting off the old men’s robes, and pouring them tea. And now that he and the situation had calmed down, he managed to finally sneak a few glances at the two men.

Despite the fact they wore casual robes, they both had a lofty air about them. One of these men had to be the master of this household, Qiao Mao. He'd probably kept the door shut to discourage visitors from the imperial court.

"This junior has overstepped," Zhou Yu said as he hurried to bow. "I disturbed your match. While great men care not for the actions of lesser ones, please accept my most humble apologies."

With that, Zhou Yu placed the black and white pieces to the positions they'd held before the interruption. Surprise swept over the two old men's faces.

The old man with the darker hair, wearing the everyday outfit of an official, spoke first. "Since you have come, be at ease. Stay for now."

Prim and proper, Zhou Yu filled the two teacups, assuming the one in a better mood was probably a guest. The other old man wearing a long robe made of coarse cloth huffed as he glared at Zhou Yu, furious his ruse of being away from home had been seen through.

Zhou Yu didn’t dare say anything more, but with a bright flash of clarity, he knew this was the master of the estate, Qiao Mao.

“Situ, your ploy within a ploy was executed beautifully!” Qiao Mao exclaimed, stroking his beard. “Are you not afraid of falling hook, line, and sinker for a trap?”

The title “Situ” referred to the Minister of the Masses. The Minister of the Masses, the Minister of Works, and the Grand Commandant made up the Three Ducal Ministers, the highest posts men could achieve as officials, and this person who Qiao Mao had called “Situ” was, without a doubt, Wang Yun.

Wang Yun merely stroked his beard and smiled gently. “The qi pieces our young friend laid out for me have, without my knowledge, become this ploy within a ploy.”

Qiao Mao set down another piece, and Wang Yun responded in kind.

“Does the Minister of the Masses hold such confidence in this match?” Qiao Mao asked.

“In this world, most matters are not ones I have any confidence in,” Wang Yun said. “Just now, weren’t we set in our course when our young friend skewed us off our intended direction?”

Qiao Mao laughed loudly as he pushed the qi board away. “I’m done. Let’s leave it at this.”

Wang Yun rose and nodded, cupping his hands in Qiao Mao’s direction. Zhou Yu thought for a moment, but just as he was about to speak, Wang Yun shot him a look before glancing at Qiao Mao, a question in his gaze.

“Why doesn’t this young friend—”

Qiao Mao stopped him. “I need to scold him properly.”

“All right, all right,” Wang Yun responded, amused. “Then I shall take my leave.”

Qiao Mao saw Wang Yun off, and Zhou Yu followed them to the door. As soon as Wang Yun stepped outside the gates, Qiao Mao shut the doors, and from the alley, multiple people rose from the surrounding tea

stalls, food stalls, and wine stalls. All were normal citizens who came only to guarantee Wang Yun's safety.

Zhou Yu was not as perceptive as he should've been. This was his first trip out of Jiangnan, and he'd let his guard down.

After Qiao Mao saw Wang Yun off, he crossed through the corridor. Zhou Yu followed, but after only a few steps, a servant met Qiao Mao with a bronze basin to wash his hands and face. This was the perfect opportunity for Zhou Yu.

"Prefect Qiao, this junior…"

Qiao Mao grunted, tossing the towel into the basin and leveling a glare at Zhou Yu. "You look exactly like your father, you're similarly cunning, and you appear as unafraid of death as he was. Why have you come to Luoyang?"

Zhou Yu was stunned. "Prefect Qiao recognizes me?"

"Who else could you be but Zhou Yi's son?!" Qiao Mao exclaimed. "Everyone is running away from Luoyang. Yet you've run here instead! Are you looking to die?"

"This junior's family… Something has happened in Shu County," Zhou Yu explained.

Qiao Mao strode away, and Zhou Yu followed at a moderate distance, finishing his explanation of why he came to Luoyang.

Coming to a stop at the reception hall, Qiao Mao sat down. "Ah, well. You could have chosen anywhere else, yet you came right for my manor."

"This one would like to request Uncle Qiao help me search, on behalf of the friendship between our two families," Zhou Yu said. "The thirty-six families in Shu County would be eternally grateful."

"Come, sit," Qiao Mao ordered.

With that, they both settled in. The servants brought them wine and food. Zhou Yu was silent for a moment before waving his hand in dismissal; he wouldn't be drinking any wine. He poured a cup of tea for himself instead.

Qiao Mao sighed. “It is not that I do not wish to assist you, and there is no harm in helping you in your investigation, but you’ve seen the current situation. This old man does not even dare to set foot outside. Over these past few days I’ve been excusing myself from court sessions on account of an illness. How can I be of any help?”

Zhou Yu straightened up slightly but didn’t say anything.

Qiao Mao continued after a moment of thought, “Since your father is Zhou Yi, then logically speaking, your family has no reason to side with Dong Zhuo, so there’s no issue in speaking openly with you.”

Zhou Yu sighed and nodded but remained silent. Qiao Mao’s meaning was clear: Zhou Yi had died in Hua Xiong’s grasp, and it was likely Dong Zhuo had played a role in it. Therefore, it was impossible Zhou Yu would betray Qiao Mao and throw his lot in with Dong Zhuo.

“How is the situation in Luoyang?” Zhou Yu asked. “Though this nephew has been negligent in his practice of martial arts, I am still a little skilled. Since Uncle Qiao is here, if there is any way I can be of use, please don’t hesitate to let me know.”

Qiao Mao swished a mouthful of wine, his old face bright red. He released a long breath. “Yuan Shao is currently camped outside Hulao Pass, and he’s arranged a meeting with all of the marquises and lords who remain loyal to the throne. If my guess is right, that should be taking place in the next few days.”

Zhou Yu nursed his cup of tea, reflecting on all he had witnessed over the past few days. His worry was that the coalition wouldn’t come together easily.

“But no one can guarantee they’ll come together,” Qiao Mao added, as if he read Zhou Yu’s thoughts. “You might as well stay here and rest. Wait until after the allied troops enter the city to continue your investigation.”

“Has the Changsha prefect Sun Jian also come?” Zhou Yu asked.

“Ah, I forgot about how your father and Sun Jian were colleagues when your father was still alive,” Qiao Mao responded. “Sun Jian and his sons are in front of the Hulao Pass as well. In a few days, when my distant

cousin enters the city, I'll give you a letter. You'll go with him, and Sun Jian will recommend you to Yuan Shao. That'll be that."

Zhou Yu didn't ask anything further, instead stepping forward to formally and properly kowtow once to Qiao Mao. However, Qiao Mao dismissively waved a hand.

"No need for that; get up! Right now, people are being cut down like stalks of wheat. This old man is hard-pressed to keep his own neck intact. Who knows if I'll survive the next few days! If something happens to my household, don't blame this old man for dragging you into it."

"I won't," Zhou Yu promised. "Since I'll be residing in Uncle's home for the time being, please feel free to order me around if anything could use my help."

The corners of Qiao Mao's mouth quirked up into smile. He nodded a few times.

"Young man," he remarked, "not bad. Your father was a man who always did the right thing. After he passed, this old man often reminisced about our chats, now that there's one less of us sitting here together, with a cup in hand… Ah! But now that you're here, you should take your father's place and keep this old man company as he drinks a cup of wine."

Zhou Yu straightened and crossed the hall, sitting adjacent to Qiao Mao to chat and keep him company. Qiao Mao began by asking Zhou Yu about his family, and he answered every question, one after another, without concealing anything. As the questions continued, Qiao Mao probed him about his knowledge of the current political climate. Zhou Yu answered based on his own thoughts, his replies comprehensive yet concise. The two chatted into the night, and it was very late when Zhou Yu came to the conclusion that Qiao Mao was dealing with a matter of life and death.

Three months ago, Qiao Mao forged an imperial edict to gather all of the feudal marquises and lords to charge Dong Zhuo with eleven offenses. The message was delivered overnight to Yuan Shao, and the gathered lords formed the Coalition Against Dong. Whether the imperial edict was actually issued by Emperor Xian was not important. The only prerequisite was a suitable justification for forming the coalition.

Once the intelligence from their allied armies reached Luoyang, everyone became infuriated with Dong Zhuo. The people of Luoyang had hated him for a long time because after he entered the capital, he allowed the Liang Province army to ransack the city while he seized complete control over the emperor. Yuan Shao thus faced no resistance, and the people were overjoyed by news of the approaching army. From then on, all of Luoyang, from the members of the aristocratic clans to the general populace, eagerly awaited Yuan Shao's entrance to the city so he could rescue the Son of Heaven and expel the Liang Province's forces.

However, Yuan Shao's allied forces had stopped a hundred miles outside the capital and remained there for over a month. They sent a secret envoy to Qiao Mao, explaining their army was not complete, and they had to wait for the various marquises and lords to gather before storming Luoyang.

With these delays, Dong Zhuo grew suspicious, and he began to conduct rigorous investigations throughout the city. He feared some court officials were secretly communicating with Yuan Shao. As Qiao Mao was the most stubborn, naturally he became the first target of investigation. He knew Dong Zhuo would set an example by killing him before Yuan Shao could launch his attack, so he dismissed his servants and stayed home, awaiting death.

The entire city was sealed off from the outside to prevent Yuan Shao from sending secret envoys into Luoyang. However, the crumbs of clues Dong Zhuo wanted to track down were lost as well. He had no choice but to leave Qiao Mao suspended between life and death. Since there were many other complications Dong Zhuo was dealing with, the issue of Qiao Mao was set aside temporarily. There was no use in causing more trouble for himself.

It took Qiao Mao the better half of the night to explain, and although his words were self-deprecating, they made Zhou Yu's heart ache. This old man placed all of his hopes on Yuan Shao, so why was he wasting time? The delay was apparently because the various members of the coalition couldn't agree and argued among themselves.

"Are you scared yet?" Qiao Mao asked, a little tipsy. "If you are, it's not too late to go hide in the Minister of the Masses's household tonight."

Zhou Yu turned down the offer with a smile and took a sip of wine. His mind, however, was focused on how he could contact Sun Ce. Qiao Mao drank until his head thunked down onto the table. He was dead to the world. Zhou Yu retired to a guest room, and as he rested, a detailed plan gradually came together in his mind.

He removed Fei Yu from the bundle he had brought. The falcon was small and fit well in the bag but had been trapped inside it for a few days now, its beak tied shut with a strip of cloth. Zhou Yu stroked its feathers and softly spoke to it. The bird turned its head and looked at him, then at its surroundings. It leaped through the window, spread its wings, and flew away into the black curtain of night.

That day, Fei Yu disappeared entirely. Zhou Yu suspected it hadn't been able to find Sun Ce, who was stationed with his troops outside Hulao Pass, so it flew back to Changsha instead. In any case, it was a good thing that it had left. With how dangerous Luoyang currently was, the only things free to come and go from the city were birds.

Zhou Yu spent several days asking around for more information, but he found out absolutely nothing more about the silk caravan. Instead, rumors of unrest slowly seeped out from within the palace. Some said that Dong Zhuo was preparing to pillage the households of Luoyang's government officials and rob the large households, which was why people could enter Luoyang but not leave.

The entire city grew tense overnight, as rumors spread like wildfire. However, when Zhou Yu went to the market the following day, he gleaned the glimmer of a clue about the caravan. Someone said they had seen the silk merchants from Jiangnan in Luoyang's Western Market, and when Zhou Yu inquired there, he found his confirmation.

Several months ago, when the silk caravan entered Luoyang, they'd heard the trade routes leading westward were being disrupted due to unrest. The leader of the silk merchants decided to sell off their silks in Luoyang so the caravan could return to Shu County as soon as possible. However, none of them expected Luoyang itself to be embroiled in political turmoil. As no one was willing to buy their goods, they were forced to leave the Sili region and continue westward. In order to catch up to them, Zhou Yu would need to cross many checkpoints. He had no connections here, so it would be

difficult for him to even leave the city, let alone cross military checkpoints. He had no choice but to request travel documentation.

“When did they leave?” Wang Yun asked, turning only slightly toward Zhou Yu.

“According to what I heard, it was on the third day of last month,” Zhou Yu replied. “They took the route through the Eight Passes of the Taihang Mountains.”

“Then they should have already left the Hangu Pass.”

“Lord Minister of the Masses…is it possible to get in contact with the garrison stationed there?” Zhou Yu asked. “I came to request a letter from the Minister of the Masses himself, and I will always remember the Lord Minister’s benevolence. This junior wouldn’t dare to inconvenience you any further.”

“This takes less effort than lifting a finger, so there’s no need to thank me.” Wang Yun smiled. “Who knows how long these old bones will last. If I can write you a letter and save a few people, I would be happy to. Bring me the ink.”

A servant came forward with a brush and ink. Zhou Yu’s heart filled with gratitude, so much so that he didn’t notice the servant girl glancing at him a few times too often.

Zhou Yu continued to plan in his mind. Having obtained a letter penned by Wang Yun himself, the next step was figuring out how to leave and what excuses he would have to come up with. As Zhou Yu mulled over this, that serving girl’s dazzling appearance caught his eye, and though he passively noticed her a few more times, he felt nothing in his heart. It was like admiring a flower or fine painting.

“This is my ward, Diaochan,” Wang Yun said by way of introduction.

“Please forgive me my lack of manners,” Zhou Yu apologized, realizing he was being rude.

Diaochan smiled wanly and knelt by Wang Yun’s desk, rolling up her sleeves and pinning them at the sides before beginning to grind the ink.

“Though Zhou-gongzi has the letter now, how do you plan on exiting the city?” she asked in a quiet voice. “Grand Preceptor Dong will not allow

you to leave.”

At that moment, something darted through the window, flapping all the way into the hall.

“Fei Yu!” Zhou Yu snatched the white falcon out of the air. He’d never expected it to find its way here. There was a cloth strip tied to Fei Yu’s leg that appeared written on, but Zhou Yu couldn’t take a closer look now, instead stowing the white falcon away. Tactful as he was, Wang Yun didn’t ask any questions, instead pointedly taking the time to finish the letter he was writing Zhou Yu and then sealing it. Diaochan took it, and the father and daughter pair exchanged a meaningful glance, coming to a tacit understanding.

Zhou Yu’s mind was weighed down by worry as he stepped out into the courtyard. He unfolded the cloth strip, only to see a message written in blood.

Xiandi,[16] *you must not enter Luoyang. If you already have, seek refuge with Lü Bu, Lü Fengxian. In three days, the battle drums will be our signal. Wait for me. I will find you. Be careful. Your brother, Bofu*

Zhou Yu frowned, unsure of the meaning behind Sun Ce’s message. If not for the familiar handwriting, he would have thought this letter had been intercepted and exchanged for bait. If that was the case, he was not eager to follow its advice.

A voice called out from behind him. “Zhou-gongzi.”

Zhou Yu quickly hid the message. He turned around and bowed. “Wang-guniang.”

Diaochan’s expression was calm and composed. “My father asked me to see you off.”

Wang Yun’s house was definitely under surveillance, and with eyes and ears everywhere, having Diaochan see him off and exchange a few words was less likely to rouse suspicion.

“I heard that Zhou-gongzi is from Jiangzuo. Is that right?” Diaochan asked, smiling. “I could not tell at all!”

Although Zhou Yu had been born in Shu County, he was over six feet tall and sturdy. Though individual features of his didn’t read as a

Southerner's, his handsome yet gentle visage and the lines of his body revealed his true origins.

"My family has resided in Shu County ever since my grandfather's generation," Zhou Yu replied. "However, according to our records, our ancestors actually lived in the north during the Warring States period."

Diaochan nodded. "I overheard my adoptive father say that Zhou-gongzi was originally from a family of medical practitioners; is that true?"

"You overestimate my skills," he replied. "My late father was somewhat skilled in acupuncture, but after he took up his position in court, he no longer saw or treated patients. His techniques, other than what he taught me, have been lost to time."

Diaochan made a noise of agreement. "My father often speaks of the years he and Uncle Zhou served as imperial officials together… He always praises his exquisite medical skills. When he suffered from rheumatism, head colds, or the like, it was always Uncle Zhou who nursed him back to health."

"You praise him too highly," Zhou Yu said modestly. "Even the legendary doctor Hua Tuo[17] would not be able to cure the diseases caused by the damp and cold. Acupuncture can only temporarily dispel bad energy brought about by an excess of the wind element. Treating an illness requires the right medicine to treat the symptoms. As long as the disease is diagnosed correctly, naturally the medicine will be effective. However, full recovery varies by the individual… Is something wrong? Has the Lord Minister recently…?"

Diaochan's eyebrows had furrowed slightly; evidently something was weighing on her mind. The only thought that her worry conjured in Zhou Yu's head was the possibility that Wang Yun was ill. However, Diaochan shook her head gently and smiled.

"My adoptive father is in good health, but I am grateful for Zhou-gongzi's concern."

What else could it be? Though Diaochan seemed to have something to say, she changed the topic, her voice dropping to a whisper.

"Right now, everyone in Luoyang is in danger, and all the doctors have fled. If Zhou-gongzi is well-versed in medicine, I would like to

request one thing of you…”

“There’s no harm in speaking freely,” Zhou Yu said, finally understanding her hesitance. Diaochan must know someone who needed treatment, so he cut straight to the point. “However, I do not have a medicine chest, nor am I carrying any medicinal herbs with me, so I can only do my best with what I have.”

Diaochan looked relieved, as if she had shed a heavy burden. “Gongzi does not need to worry. Please follow me.”

Zhou Yu trailed after Diaochan, twisting through the back gardens toward a secluded side yard.

In a hushed voice, she said, “Three days ago, this man entered the palace under the guise of offering up a sword he found and attempted to assassinate that traitor, Dong Zhuo. He was unsuccessful, but he managed to escape. The entirety of Luoyang has been sealed off, however, and this righteous gentleman is gravely injured. All I ask is that Zhou-gongzi do his best. Whether he lives or dies is up to the heavens.”

He’d originally thought this would be an ordinary doctor visit, not that the patient would be someone who betrayed Dong Zhuo. Diaochan and Zhuo Yu were complete strangers. She was entrusting him with this secret by relying solely on the reputation of the Zhou family name. Should he reveal this to anyone, Diaochan and Wang Yun’s entire family would be executed. This alone showed how much bravery and courage Diaochan possessed.

She pushed the door open. “This just gentleman has never been talkative, so I hope Zhou-gongzi will forgive him… Lord Mengde, I found you a doctor.”

Astonishment still fresh in his mind, Zhou Yu followed her in. The stench of blood immediately overwhelmed him. As Diaochan brought over a medicine box, the three of them remained silent.

“Forget it.” The man was drinking wine, but he set aside his glass. “Life and death are dictated by fate. There is no need to go through this extra effort if the heavens do not will it.”

Zhou Yu studied the assassin. He was under six feet tall, and since his full beard covered his cheeks, it was difficult to guess how old he was. He

was obviously past middle age. Peering back at Zhou Yu were bright, penetrating eyes that gave the impression this man had the wisdom and vigilance to see into the hearts of others. Though he was half obscured by shadow, his arms were powerful, thick, and bare, and purplish-black blood seeped from the bandaged wound around the left side of his chest.

He was sprawled in his seat, legs spread. One hand was draped over his knee, while the other held a pitcher which he tilted to pour wine straight into his mouth.

Although Zhou Yu wasn't experienced enough to be able to read a person entirely, he was still able to discern telltale hints about their personality based on their appearance. The man before him possessed a rugged temperament and was truly an extraordinary individual. He had dared to enter the palace alone to assassinate Dong Zhuo, modeling himself on the hero Jing Ke.[18] Zhou Yu couldn't help but respect him.

"This one's name is Zhou Yu, courtesy name Gongjin."

"Cao Cao. I am only a couple years older than you, so you can just call me Mengde-xiong,"[19] he said, looking over Zhou Yu appraisingly. "Are you Zhou Yi's scion?"

"That is correct."

Their eyes met, and it was as if they gazed at each other across the span of a thousand years and ten thousand acres of land. Zhou Yu was filled with nothing but admiration for him.

He could never imagine that one day in the future, when the rivers ran red with the blood spilled during the Battle of Chi Bi and the world was set aflame in raging fires, he and this man would stand across from each other once again, staring at each other across a vast battlefield.

All those endless months and years, all their lofty aspirations to conquer the world—condensed into one single glance.

"Quickly," Diaochan said in a low voice. "Zhou-gongzi, if you would."

Returning to his senses, Zhou Yu approached Cao Cao to examine his injuries. Most of his wounds were superficial, except for an arrow that had

burrowed into his body. Its head was embedded deeply into his ribs, missing his lungs by barely an inch.

Zhou Yu unwound Cao Cao's bandages and cleansed his wounds with some wine. Cao Cao was indeed resilient, because he simply lay still on the bed as Zhou Yu treated him, never even twitching. Zhou Yu handed him the wine, and Cao Cao partook as he waited for Zhou Yu to remove the arrow.

"Your father has passed?" Cao Cao asked.

"Yes," Zhou Yu replied mildly. "Three years ago."

Cao Cao drank, focused on filling himself with wine. "Are you planning to enter the capital and become an official? With the way the world is right now, that won't be easy."

Zhou Yu's fingers squelched into Cao Cao's wound, his hands covered with blood.

"I came to the capital to evaluate the situation, but I have no wish to follow in the well-worn footsteps of my late father."

"Day by day, the morals of this world are degrading, and the hearts of the people are slipping away," Cao Cao mused. "Let me give you a word of advice: Do not tarry long in the capital."

As Zhou Yu yanked at the arrowhead, Cao Cao gritted his teeth and let out a muffled grunt. Fresh blood spurted from the wound, and Zhou Yu quickly staunched the bleeding with a cloth, his hands completely dyed red. Diaochan handed him a bottle of medicinal paste.

"When people live in troubled times, they don't have the right to live solely for themselves," Zhou Yu replied. "If I could leave, I would have, long ago. Hasn't Lord Cao also stayed?"

Cao Cao gasped for air, his face white as a sheet. Zhou Yu speedily applied the paste. Before he could get far, a commotion roused their attention.

From outside, a soldier spoke. "Wang-daren, if I could trouble you…"

Immediately suspicious, Zhou Yu turned an inquiring gaze to Diaochan, who motioned for him to remain calm. "I will deal with this."

She walked into the corridor and as she closed the door behind her, she turned to see Wang Yun standing in the middle of the courtyard.

“You all… The audacity!” he shouted.

“We apologize for the offense, Wang-daren.”

A military general strolled forward; he wore a robe embroidered with a black qilin,[20] a martial headpiece sitting like a crown atop his head. Like an elegant tree of jade in the wind, he had an air about him of grace and coordination. Under his dark eyebrows that were like an eagle spreading its wings, he had deep-set eyes with pitch-black pupils dusted amber. Standing a whole head taller than his subordinates, the general stuck out like a crane in a flock of chickens.

“This humble official had no other choice,” he explained. “Grand Preceptor Dong’s orders. We must find the assassin today.”

“General Lü,” Wang Yun replied coldly, hands resting on the cane planted on the ground in front of him. “Does the Marquis of Mei still think I’m harboring thoughts of assassination?”

“It seems like the Lord Minister of the Masses is not aware,” Lü Bu said. “Three days ago, there was an assassin who, under the guise of offering up a sword, managed to wound Grand Preceptor Dong. We learned the assassin is still in the city. Please pardon our intrusion. Search!”

Wang Yun’s expression wavered as Lü Bu’s subordinates scattered across the residence and started to search. Nodding at Wang Yun, deciding not to waste any more words, Lü Bu walked on his own into the corridor.

At the same moment, Diaochan exited a room nearby, and the two all but crashed into each other. Lü Bu reflexively reached out to steady her, and Diaochan’s flowerlike face lost its color.

She bowed. “Greetings, General.”

When Diaochan lifted her head, their eyes locked. Both fell silent. Wang Yun, who had followed behind Lü Bu, arrived to the scene, and he introduced her.

“This is my daughter Diaochan. Diaochan, why haven’t you apologized to the general yet?”

“Pardon me,” Diaochan said softly.

“It’s…it’s all right.” For a moment, Lü Bu’s cold, composed face twisted into an awkward expression, but he just as quickly recovered.

“Why doesn’t my daughter lead the general inside so he can search?” Wang Yun piped up, his crafty brain working away. He glanced meaningfully at Diaochan.

“That should be acceptable,” Lü Bu said coldly. “Lead the way.”

Diaochan bowed again before proceeding to guide Lü Bu through the corridor to the side chambers. As Lü Bu followed, his gaze swept over her from head to toe. He wanted to say something but wasn’t sure how to strike up a conversation. Abruptly, Diaochan came to a stop in front of him, and unable to halt in time, Lü Bu almost bumped into her again.

She turned around. “General, this is my room… I don’t know if…”

“Leave it be,” he said, with a wave of his hand. “Let’s go to the side courtyard.”

Diaochan took Lü Bu through the arched doorway and toward the back courtyard. They paused by the pool as the autumn breeze blew past. Fallen leaves drifted on the pond’s surface, and an old servant swept the ground just past the entryway.

“That’s the extent of it,” Diaochan said. “This is the study. Does the general wish to go inside?”

The soldiers started to enter, but after catching a glimpse of Lü Bu in the back courtyard, they turned away to continue their search elsewhere. As they were leaving, Lü Bu spoke to one of his subordinates.

“Give the order not to search the lady’s personal rooms.”

The soldier outside the door responded affirmatively. Diaochan’s heart thumped. When she turned, she noticed Lü Bu was observing her.

“Why are you nervous?” he asked, searching her expression.

Diaochan did not reply as she walked to the edge of the pond and then gazed at the crisp, clear water.

“I would like to ask you one thing,” he said from where he stood behind her. “Has Cao Cao been here? Tell me the truth.”

“What does the general mean? No such thing has happened.”

The corners of Lü Bu’s mouth curled up slightly, his focus landing on the door of the small shed.

A hand reached out behind the window and cleanly swiped across the windowsill.

“No?” Lü Bu asked, turning and leaping onto the railing of the corridor. He jumped down in front of the door, shoving it open.

The room was completely empty.

An autumn breeze brushed through the shed’s window, bringing with it the scent of blood to the outside hall. Lü Bu stared.

Hidden underneath the windowsill on the other side of the shed facing the stable, Zhou Yu cradled his blood-soaked hands, and Cao Cao, leaning against the foot of the wall, drank wine. The corners of Cao Cao’s lips twitched upward as he gave Zhou Yu a big thumbs-up.

Lü Bu examined the top of the windowsill. He slid a finger across it, only for it to come up clean; no dust. Diaochan entered behind him, and he turned his head to study her. After a moment of silence, he exited the shed.

“My father would like to invite the general to stay for a cup of wine,” she hurried to say.

Lü Bu glanced briefly at her, seemingly wanting to depart. However, a moment later, he accepted. “Then lay out the wine.”

Zhou Yu and Cao Cao struggled back inside, a bit worse for wear. Both of them released a long breath.

“I must leave the capital as quickly as possible,” Cao Cao said quietly.

“You have to rest for a few more days,” Zhou Yu replied. “If you leave in your condition, you’ll be captured before long.”

“Then you must come with me,” Cao Cao said.

“To see Yuan Shao?”

Though Zhou Yu trained himself to remain alert to the situation at hand, his heart leaped. If he could successfully reach Yuan Shao’s coalition, he could see Sun Ce.

“Come, follow me,” Zhou Yu said.

After checking for hidden sentries, Zhou Yu began to lead Cao Cao to Qiao Mao's residence.

"Yuan Shao is incompetent at strategizing," Cao Cao said. "I must first return to Xu Province and meet with Tao Qian." Zhou Yu did not respond, and so Cao Cao continued, "You look like you have guts and possess a meticulous mind. You are not prone to passivity, or you would not carry a sword, so you have enough martial skills to protect yourself. With you keeping me company on the journey, my safety is practically guaranteed."

After pondering for a moment, Zhou Yu shook his head. "I have not finished dealing with matters here, so I am unable to protect Cao-gong on this journey. Please forgive me."

Cao Cao smiled faintly, but he didn't insist.

"Is this Governor Qiao Mao's residence? I was just about to go find him," he said.

Zhou Yu nodded and led Cao Cao into Qiao Mao's hall. He pushed the door open and let Cao Cao walk in. Upon seeing him, Qiao Mao immediately blanched, shocked. Zhou Yu shut the door, leaving the two of them inside the hall to speak. He laid his hand on the hilt of his sword, standing guard.

As soon as he heard loud laughter from Cao Cao and Qiao Mao, he knew they would be fine. Reassured, Zhou Yu left.

That night, Cao Cao took up temporary residence in Qiao Mao's estate, and he drank with Qiao Mao until late into the night. In contrast, Zhou Yu tossed and turned in bed, the words of Sun Ce's letter racing through his mind. What did he mean, seek refuge with Lü Bu? Was Lü Bu actually on *their* side?!

He didn't dare rashly side with Lü Bu, so he called over Fei Yu and penned a letter, asking Sun Ce for more details. He then sent the falcon flying away. Judging from the direction the bird flew, he estimated it was heading toward the Hulao Pass or somewhere thereabouts.

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That same day Zhou Yu was shopping for rice noodles for Qiao Mao when a servant girl approached him in a rush and slipped a small note into his hand. While no one was watching, Zhou Yu unfolded the message and was forced to withhold his shock.

Dong Zhuo is moving the capital. Governor Qiao's name is not on the list of officials. Hurry and flee.

This graceful handwriting could only belong to Diaochan. He did not know where she had obtained this information; perhaps it had come from Lü Bu. Zhou Yu thought for a moment. If Dong Zhuo was moving the capital, the entire imperial court and every government official would need to follow him. What did it mean to leave Qiao Mao behind? Was this leading to the elimination of Qiao Mao?

Zhou Yu abandoned his errand and sprinted back to the Qiao residence. Still short of breath, he threw open the door, only to see Qiao Mao speaking with another middle-aged man inside the hall.

"You must leave Luoyang immediately," Zhou Yu announced. "Minister Wang has new information. It is very likely Dong Zhuo wants to harm Governor Qiao."

"Then let him come!" Qiao Mao's fuse lit quickly, and he slapped his hand against the table, sending the cups and plates rattling.

As Zhou Yu stepped forward, he gripped his sword. Standing there, stalwart, his tall stature blocking the daylight streaming in from outside, he was as unyielding as a mountain.

"I beg you to listen!" Zhou Yu implored. "Why does Governor Qiao insist on remaining here? You can only contend against Dong Zhuo in the future by ensuring your *current* survival."

After taking in Zhou Yu's words, Qiao Mao suddenly burst out into loud laughter, shaking his head.

"Young man," Qiao Mao said, amused, "this old man has lived so long even death cannot scare me. Why should I fear a mere traitor to the nation?"

“It’s precisely because you don’t fear death,” Zhou Yu replied. “If you don’t, then why should you fear living?”

“Second Uncle,” the middle-aged man added. “Nephew Zhou is right. Is there any purpose in staying?”

“This old man has already finished what he set out to do, which was to pass on the imperial edict to the various lords and marquises. That snake Dong Zhou’s time is limited. We should leave the world to you youngsters now.”

Qiao Mao thoughtfully sipped a mouthful of wine. Under the flickering light of the oil lamp, he seemed to age significantly. Zhou Yu took a deep breath, then let out a long sigh.

“Cao Mengde already left,” Qiao Mao said. “You should pack. Once this old man finishes making my arrangements, I will escort you and Qiao Xuan out of the city.”

Zhou Yu wanted to say more, but Qiao Mao waved for him to leave. “Qiao Xuan, make sure this nephew of mine goes back to rest.”

As Qiao Xuan stood, he gestured for Zhou Yu to leave first.

“Qiao-daren,” Zhou Yu acknowledged, now standing in the middle of the courtyard.

“Nephew Zhou,” Qiao Xuan replied. “On your way here from the Jiangnan region, did you hear of any news from Wu County?”

“The Jiangnan region hasn’t experienced any unrest, but this…”

“Let’s wait until tonight,” Qiao Xuan said. “Why don’t we think of a way to kidnap my second uncle and force him to leave?”

Zhou Yu could only nod, and he went to pack his things. He could no longer stay in Luoyang, as Dong Zhuo’s purge of the city was imminent. That night, he kept himself awake, awaiting Fei Yu’s return, but it never arrived.

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Deep into the night Qiao Xuan woke him, signaling him to be quiet. “We’re leaving.”

Zhou Yu slung his satchel over his shoulder. When he passed through the main hall, he saw Qiao Mao sitting there, polishing a long sword, and a tally lay on the table before him.

“This is a travel pass obtained through my connections,” Qiao Mao said. “Cao Mengde already took one and left the city last night. You two ride along, quickly. Take the main road heading east. You must not come back.”

“Second Uncle!” Qiao Xuan protested.

Zhou Yu stepped forward. He intended to manhandle Qiao Mao into coming along, no matter his protests. But at that moment, banging and shouting came from the main gate.

“Open your door! Open up!”

Zhou Yu jumped, and Qiao Mao rushed the two of them toward the back door.

“Not outside!” Zhou Yu protested.

It was too late—the soldiers kicked the doors open. The troops swarmed in like bees, shouting. “No one is allowed to leave! Where are Qiao Mao and Qiao Xuan?!”

Realizing his responsibility to protect Qiao Xuan, Zhou Yu helped the other man out into the backyard alone. Their eyes teared up with sorrow. A soldier’s anguished shout echoed inside the house; Qiao Mao was fighting back.

Qiao Xuan’s eyes darted back, and he moved to return, but Zhou Yu stopped him.

“We have to leave, now!”

The two mounted their warhorses and galloped away.

Screams filled the air. Fires burned along the streets, blazing all around them. Luoyang was submerged in a sea of flame. Arrows flew wildly across the rooftops and along the streets. Yuan Shao’s allied forces

were attacking the city. Amid the chaos, Qiao Xuan's horse was struck by an arrow, and it crashed to the ground.

Stopping suddenly, Zhou Yu dismounted, and then he pushed Qian Xuan onto his own horse. Now sharing the same steed, they rushed to the city's exit, only to find the Eastern Gate up in flames.

There was no way to escape.

Zhou Yu spurred his horse on, leaping up to higher ground. Several times, he urged it to jump over a collapsed roof, but even the trained warhorse shrank back in fear.

Zhou Yu's breaths stuttered as he panicked.

"Forget it," Qiao Xuan said. "Nephew, let me off the horse. I do not want to slow you down any longer."

Zhou Yu was silent, then he dismounted. With an elegant backhanded swing of his sword, he jabbed the horse's rump. The steed released a long, pained whinny and shot off, galloping away.

"Zhou Gongjin!" Qiao Xuan roared.

"Have a safe journey!" Zhou Yu shouted back.

The warhorse dashed to the edge of the roof and leaped through the air over the sea of flames that was the East Gate, carrying Qiao Xuan with it to safety.

Zhou Yu's eyes reflected the raging flames that filled the sky. Ash flew through the air, and as the thousand-year-old ancient capital was cremated in that fiery sea, the countless weeping and wailing voices sounded like a dirge for the glory of the dynasty.

I can't give up yet… Zhou Yu glanced around at his surroundings. He had to survive. If he could find a well or cellar, he could hide there until the fire ran itself down. Sprinting down the main street, he was barely able to dodge the collapse of flaming buildings. The street was a hell, filled with gray ash and black smoke. He covered his face with a cloth, coughing frantically as he staggered forward.

Fire lay before him and licked at his back. As far as he could see, he was surrounded by towers of crimson lotuses stretching into the sky.

With a screech, a white falcon swooped down from above.

“Fei Yu…” Zhou Yu hacked as he stumbled to the ground of some charred ruins, his hair singed from the high temperatures. The white falcon grabbed his arm with its talons.

“Hurry…hurry and leave…” Zhou Yu swung his hand, trying to fling the bird away. His eyes were bloodshot, and tears streamed nonstop down his cheeks from the smoke. He felt like he was going to cough up his lungs, heart, and everything else. Using his remaining strength, he tried to rise when the faint cries of someone in the distance shouting his name reached him.

“Zhou Gongjin!”

Zhou Yu gaped around, bewildered. The neigh of a warhorse cut through the chaos as a house crumbled behind him. Sparks and flames erupted in all directions, and a tall, sturdy horse appeared, flying through the air before alighting on the ground and rushing toward the middle of the street. Vaulting off the horse, the man who’d called for him pressed himself over Zhou Yu, shielding him with his body.

Sun Ce coughed as he removed his helmet, revealing his red eyes and face covered with ash and dust. Tears flowed down his cheeks, though whether they were from the smoke or his joy at their reunion after such a long separation, no one could say.

“Bofu?!” Zhou Yu shouted. “Bofu!”

The two clung tightly to each other.

Without another word, Sun Ce pulled Zhou Yu up onto his horse and charged into the fire with him.

All Zhou Yu could remember from that day were the raging flames, the thick smoke, blazing embers, and the scorching heat burning his eyes. Through a veil of uncontrollable tears, they reined the horse to a stop high up on the city walls and watched the city of Luoyang immolated in this magnificent sacrificial rite.

Chapter 3:
Reuniting

UNDER THE SHADOW of the Hangu Pass, the wind carried voices of ghosts, and the sun set—scarlet red, bloodred. The withered grass stank like kindling, and from afar echoed the muted sounds of crying.

The two ash-covered, bedraggled young men sat outside a mostly collapsed thatched hut, smoke rising from their campfire.

Sitting on a stone, Zhou Yu ravenously devoured some dried meat and beans that'd been cooked in a clay pot.

"Don't burn your mouth," Sun Ce teased.

Zhou Yu ignored him, grabbed the water Sun Ce set aside, and swigged from it. The fresh spring water dripped from the corners of his mouth.

"The most exotic delicacies I've ever had can't compare to your clay pot beans, Bofu," Zhou Yu said, swallowing another mouthful. His hair was unbound and messy, and his expensive embroidered robe was absolutely filthy.

He shook his head and continued, "This life of mine, Zhou Gongjin's life, is yours to do with as you see fit from now on."

Sun Ce released a loud, hearty laugh. His handsome face was so sooty it looked as if he had climbed through a chimney. Zhou Yu set down the pot, drank another mouthful of water, and wiped his face.

He staggered to the stream to clean himself while Sun Ce spoke from afar. "You have to sign your name, stamp, and hand your contract of servitude to me right now. That way I can go to your house later on and demand your mother hand you over."

Zhou Yu did not respond, instead squatting down by the stream to wash his face. Sun Ce chuckled as he began to scoop up beans with his bare hands.

"Can't you wash your hands first?!" Zhou Yu shouted angrily.

“You nag me more than my own mother.”

“It’s as if you don’t like being clean,” Zhou Yu said, lecturing him and using a towel to wipe Sun Ce’s hands.

Sun Ce was tickled pink and laughed to himself. “My mother always told me to bring back a wife so that someone else could keep a firm hold over me. The way I see it, there’s no need for a wife anymore. You’ll do. Honestly, you *far* surpass my mother’s fussiness.”

Zhou Yu glanced at him, refusing to respond to Sun Ce’s words. He then left, heading into the hut to lie down. After an entire day and night of running around, he was exhausted.

Sun Ce finished his beans outside, watching the sun sink little by little below the horizon, squatting like a devoted hound guarding its house.

“If you’re willing to sell your life just like that, how will you thank me later?” he muttered to himself.

Zhou Yu blinked, confused.

Sun Ce did not speak again, but the corners of his mouth turned upward into a faint smile as he watched the last bit of dying sun gradually fade away.

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Zhou Yu slept very poorly that night. One moment his dreams were ablaze with the sea of flames that was Luoyang; the next, they were reverberating with wails of misery. He woke several times, but every time he did, he was reassured that Sun Ce was by his side. Knowing this was the safest place in the world, he always fell soundly back asleep.

After a few hours, Sun Ce’s head drooped. He was too sleepy to stay awake, so he gave up keeping watch, crawled into the thatched hut, and fell asleep next to Zhou Yu. Their two heads pressed close together. Autumn was arriving and the weather was growing chilly. Sun Ce’s body was like a natural heater, so Zhou Yu intuitively drew tightly to him.

They didn’t know how long they slept. The night was still as dark and thick as ink, yet for some unknown reason, both men woke in the middle of that profoundly silent night.

Zhou Yu felt Sun Ce’s breath hitch first, before he let it out in a light exhale.

“Are you cold?” Zhou Yu asked.

“A little,” Sun Ce replied. “Let’s hit the road once it’s dawn. You should sleep a bit more.”

Zhou Yu agreed, but his mind was already awake, so he sat up instead. Sun Ce restarted the fire, and the two warmed their bodies around it. Zhou Yu raised his eyes to look at Sun Ce, only to see him smiling, his hair tied up again.

Sun Ce’s eyes reflected Zhou Yu—his bare arms, muscular chest, and thoughtful expression as he contemplated, staring into the flames.

“Where are we going next?” Zhou Yu asked.

“You’re coming with me?” Sun Ce replied with surprise, and he chuckled.

“What?” Zhou Yu said, puzzled. “Of course I’m going with you. I’ve already given my life to you. Do you take issue with that?”

“I didn’t think you actually meant it.”

Zhou Yu did not respond. After a moment of thought, he asked, “How’s the situation on the battlefield right now?”

Sun Ce mulled over his answer for a while. “My father should have invaded Luoyang by now.”

Zhou Yu’s eyes darkened with concern. Sun Ce had deserted his post to rescue Zhou Yu and could be disciplined. He gestured for Zhou Yu to look at Fei Yu crooning as it perched on the wall, trying to distract him from his worries.

“When will the reinforcements arrive?” Zhou Yu asked.

“After dawn, we will meet with them at the foot of Hangu Pass,” Sun Ce absentmindedly replied. “There, we’ll discuss what to do next.”

“Let’s go back to Changsha,” Zhou Yu said. Sun Ce raised his eyebrows at Zhou Yu, who continued, “Escaping with my life is fortunate enough. I don’t care about that caravan anymore. I was far too naive.”

Sun Ce laughed but didn’t respond. He added a little more wood to the campfire and changed the subject. “I still haven’t thought about what position to appoint you. I don’t even know where I should go from here… Say, Gongjin, what type of post do you think I can achieve in the future?”

Zhou Yu looked at Sun Ce. “Grand Commandant? Great General?”

“As of today,” Sun Ce said, “heroes from across the land are rising up in unison, and Dong Zhuo kidnapped the emperor and fled west. In a few months, the turbulence we’ve seen will reach a boiling point, and the fires of war will blaze across the land. Everyone is loudly proclaiming their allegiance to the Han royal dynasty, but in reality, not one of them will stay faithful. None of them. Not Yuan Shu, Gongsun Zan, Zhang Miao, Ma Teng, Yuan Shao, Tao Qian…or even my family. When eighteen different warlords form a coalition to overthrow Dong Zhuo, who do you think can be their leader?”

“Naturally, it will be your Sun family,” Zhou Yu said lightly.

“I’m not joking.” Sun Ce threw down the branch he’d used to stoke the fire and stood.

“I know,” Zhou Yu said, “but your words are treasonous.”

“Do not bring His Majesty or the Han royal family into this. You can joke around, but you are well aware of your father’s aspirations.” Zhou Yu was silent for a long while, so Sun Ce continued, “Dong Zhuo is extorting taxes from the people. His days are numbered. When the world falls into chaos, the warlords who participated in today’s battle will form their own factions. We will see then who becomes the emergent power in this realm.”

“None of them will be able to do it,” Zhou Yu said.

“The Yuan family, maybe,” Sun Ce said, turning his head to watch Zhou Yu. “For generations, the Yuan family has held high positions in the government, and right now their voice is the loudest.”

“No,” Zhou Yu insisted. “Although Yuan Shu and Yuan Shao have a great reputation, Yuan Shu is mired in the pleasures of the flesh, stubborn,

and set in his ways. Yuan Shao is indecisive and irresolute. In addition, these two often scheme against each other, so even if they can assume the role of leader in this alliance, they will not convince the masses that they truly want to clean up this mess.”

Sun Ce watched Zhou Yu in silence. Zhou Yu, looking thoughtful, raised his eyes to meet Sun Ce’s. “I predict in the future the person who will pick up the pieces and reform the world is not one of these eighteen warlords.”

“How about my father?” Sun Ce asked.

Their mutual gazes lingered on each other for a moment before Zhou Yu gently shook his head. Sun Ce sighed.

“You actually believe what I’m saying?” Zhou Yu asked, greatly amused.

“It’s because you’re smart,” Sun Ce said. “Even though I don’t really want to admit it, you are right.”

“If I was *really* smart, I wouldn’t be sitting here,” Zhou Yu responded.

Sun Ce peeked at Zhou Yu in his peripheral. With a mischievous glint in his eyes, Zhou Yu quickly spoke again. “But I’m happy that’s why I’m here. Your dad won’t be able to do it, but you will.”

Sun Ce laughed absently.

“Knock it off,” Zhou Yu said, seriously. “I know what’s on your mind.”

Abruptly, Sun Ce transformed into a different person. His carefree, joyful, somewhat irresponsible attitude disappeared, replaced with a serious and grave expression.

Sun Ce shushed him. “Let’s talk about this later, Gongjin. I didn’t ask for your presence by my side earlier because I was undecided then.”

“What about now?” Zhou Yu asked gently in return.

Without waiting for Sun Ce’s answer, Zhou Yu began to sketch out the terrain of the surrounding regions on the ground with a tree branch.

He motioned for Sun Ce to look as he explained, “All of the marquises’ troops are stationed at the foot of Hulao Pass and are locked in combat with Dong Zhuo. However, despite the fact that Luoyang has been sealed off for several months now, no troops have been sent forth to block Dong Zhuo’s way out. With the way things are, if they truly intend to unite under a common cause, the coalition leader Yuan Shao should lead his allied forces in besieging the city. So why haven’t they? It’s because everyone is hesitating. Whoever enters Luoyang first will inevitably seize great power.

“The fall of Dong Zhuo is but a few days away,” Zhou Yu said, resigned. “The coalition army assembled in the spring, but it is autumn now and not a single squad attempted to ambush Dong Zhuo in his westward retreat. Clearly they all want to be first into the city, to claim Luoyang…”

As Zhou Yu elaborated, he realized Sun Ce’s father was part of the group he was criticizing, so he withheld his next words. He merely looked silently at Sun Ce.

“People are inclined to seek their own gain and avoid unnecessary trouble,” Sun Ce said. “My father was also not willing to send out his troops, but he had no other choice. But what does this have to do with which of the marquises will be able to take the lead?”

“There’s a connection, obviously,” Zhou Yu said. “Don’t play dumb. They’re all staying in Hulao Pass and watching Luoyang like a tiger eyeing its prey. Other than profit, why wait there? What will they gain upon entering the city? Nothing more than mere gold, silver, valuables, and the reputation of being the one who expelled the traitor Dong Zhuo. And what benefits are there to ambushing Dong Zhuo as he flees west?”

Sun Ce raised his eyebrows and looked at Zhou Yu, puzzled. “I honestly don’t know.”

“Killing Dong Zhuo,” Zhou Yu said. “It’s a pity none of the marquises have realized this yet.”

“It’s reasonable to expect rewards for your good deeds,” Sun Ce said, thoughtlessly.

“Is it? Have you forgotten who Dong Zhuo escaped with?”

When he said these words, Sun Ce suddenly understood what he was hinting at.

“The emperor…” Sun Ce muttered. “I hadn’t thought of that.”

“You really didn’t?” Zhou Yu asked, amused. “That’s unlikely.”

“I truly hadn’t, but you are right,” Sun Ce replied sincerely. “Dong Zhuo has the emperor in his hands, and though he is young, he is still the Son of Heaven. His standing is indisputable, and in a chaotic situation like this, whichever marquis succeeds in saving the emperor will ensure the emperor is under his control instead.”

Sun Ce had to have realized this earlier, but why had he not gone to rescue the emperor? Was it only to save Zhou Yu, trapped in Luoyang? But with how Sun Ce acted ignorant, Zhou Yu did not want to force him to explain. Either way, he was flattered, being the recipient of such an honor. Sun Ce had given up on such a crucial act in order to save him instead. Zhou Yu would have to think of a way to remedy the situation, no matter what it took.

Zhou Yu continued, “No one is rescuing the emperor because they want to compete for merit and treasure. Those eighteen marquises are shortsighted; the person who will establish himself as leader in the turbulent world of the future and rise above all other factions will not be one of them. Only someone whose first thought was to conduct a rescue will be able to bear heavy responsibility and may even unite the entire world one day. What a pity that fellow’s friend holds him back all the time, delaying his important matters.”

Sun Ce laughed at that, his chuckle tinged with a youthful vigor.

“Who are you talking about, huh? Look at you, finally acknowledging that you’ve delayed my important tasks.” He poked Zhou Yu’s face with the tree branch.

Zhou Yu swatted Sun Ce’s branch with his own a few times in a playful manner before he tossed it aside.

“I won’t be playing around anymore. On a battlefield, everything can change in the blink of an eye. When Dong Zhuo was still in Luoyang, no one expected him to set fire to it and flee with the emperor. But now…” Sun Ce trailed off.

Zhou Yu rose and walked out of the hut. With the pitch-black sky as his backdrop, he looked toward Sun Ce and narrowed his eyes, as if he were thinking hard.

Sun Ce seemed to be considering something as well.

“If you had a group of soldiers on hand, could you ambush Dong Zhuo and save the emperor right now?” Zhou Yu asked, very quietly.

“Before setting out with my troops, I did consider it. But I need someone to feint an attack from the east, instead of striking from the west, so we can drive the rabbit into a trap. As long as Shifu is not in the barracks, which is unlikely, that plan would succeed. It’s too difficult, though, so my father didn’t approve of letting me pursue the emperor.”

“Shifu”? Zhou Yu noticed this specific address, but Sun Ce didn’t elaborate, so Zhou Yu didn’t inquire further.

“Go request reinforcements from your father. Ask him for one thousand men,” Zhou Yu said. “Have them meet us at the foot of Hangu Pass. Let’s get going, let’s go!”

Sun Ce only looked at Zhou Yu, who raised his eyebrows.

“Do you have any other questions?”

“No.”

Sun Ce revealed a smile, mounted his horse, and released Fei Yu into the air. As the sky began to lighten, the two headed along the mountain path, vanishing into the distance.

Fei Yu flew through the vast heavens, over the plains belching black smoke. It headed toward the city of Luoyang.

Simultaneously, the black mass of the migrating army was leaving Luoyang. Dong Zhuo and the young emperor rode in a carriage. Liu Xie lifted the hanging curtain of the window and looked out. Despite the youthfulness of his face, his eyes were tinged with numbness and bleak desolation.

After leaving Hangu Pass, they would head directly for Chang’an, the ancestral land of the Han rulers. Four hundred years of painstaking effort building Luoyang laid completely to waste by a fire. Less than fifty

thousand people remained in the capital, and they were all leaving, fleeing west with their families in tow.

Soldiers with stern, cruel countenances patrolled through the marching ranks. Dong Zhuo called over a commander and asked about the military situation along the way. Upon learning Yuan Shao and his allied forces had entered Luoyang, he set his mind to rest.

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At that moment, Sun Ce and Zhou Yu were hiding up on the mountain slopes, watching anxiously in the direction the carriage was traveling in.

Fei Yu screeched as it sped through the air toward them.

Sun Ce untied the cloth strip tied to Fei Yu's claw to check it. Neither spoke.

"Let's retreat," Sun Ce suggested.

"We've missed our opportunity," Zhou Yu responded. "Oh well."

Sun Jian was unwilling to send them men, which they'd known was always a possibility. The plans of man were nothing in the face of the will of the gods, and in the end, they had no choice but to return, tails between their legs.

They were about to head down the mountain when their path crossed in front of the Liang Province patrol, startling them.

"Who's there?" one of them roared. "Spies!"

"Capture them!"

The soldier leading the patrol immediately spotted the two of them, and Sun Ce hissed, "Run, quickly!"

At the bottom of the slope awaited only Sun Ce's white piebald; they would ride together on the mount. They slid down the mountain. Branches whipped their faces and bodies, each leaving behind a fiery lash of pain.

Zhou Yu shouted, "Break off and run! You escape first!"

Sun Ce protested, “No way!”

“Even if they catch me, I’m no use to them! Your dad is Sun Jian; if they catch you, Dong Zhuo won’t let you off easy. Quickly, now!”

Sun Ce replied angrily, “If I lose you again, how am I supposed to find you?! This isn’t up for discussion!”

Zhou Yu was giddy with emotion. Sun Ce dashed forward, dragging Zhou Yu behind him. Zhou Yu complained, breathlessly, “Why is it that every time I’m stuck with you, we end up running for our lives…”

“Our eight characters[21] don’t match up,” Sun Ce laughed.

Then the two of them simultaneously slipped sideways, down the final part of the mountain’s foot, where they mounted the white piebald.

“Capture the assassins!” the soldier issuing commands shouted.

“Don’t go that way!” Zhou Yu called loudly, his arms tucking around Sun Ce’s waist.

“What are you afraid of?! Wait until I send them running for their lives!” Sun Ce shouted optimistically. “Shaoye’s coming for you!”

Zhou Yu rolled his eyes.

Arrows whistled toward them, and Zhou Yu squeezed his eyes shut. Sun Ce urged his horse onward and managed to dash through the encirclement, right into the enemy’s caravan!

The procession fell into disarray. Rather than chase them, the soldiers turned their focus to protecting their horse carts. Sensing this reaction was wrong, Zhou Yu turned his head, studying the direction the soldiers shifted.

Sun Ce immediately guessed what he had in mind. “No. We can’t possibly do that.”

The emperor and Dong Zhuo were somewhere… For them to miss out on such an opportunity would be a pity. But before Zhou Yu could even breathe, their horse brayed and slammed into a freight cart, sending it flying. The steed leaped through the air, over the fallen cart, and slammed back to the ground before galloping away across the plains like a bolt of lightning.

The wind rushed by. As Zhou Yu surveyed their surroundings, he found their enemies were unwilling to relinquish them so easily. Thousands of Liang Province troops split off from the rest of the army and were now in hot pursuit.

“We need a way to throw them off our trail,” Zhou Yu said.

“No problem!” Sun Ce replied breezily. “My steed is a white piebald; nothing in this world can catch up with this horse!”

“You sure?”

The commander of the Liang Province troops had drastically closed the distance between them.

“Jia!” Sun Ce roared. “Like they’ll get close!”

The great jolt as the horse spurred forward almost knocked Zhou Yu from his seat.

“Careful!”

“Hang on!”

Zhou Yu unstrung the bow that was coiled around Sun Ce’s body, restringing it and leaning backward. The instant after drawing the bowstring back, he loosed an arrow which whistled through the air. The commander chasing them ducked, easily dodging it.

“He’s getting closer!”

“What?! That’s impossible!” Sun Ce said.

“If your beloved horse wasn’t carrying two people…”

“Shut up!” Sun Ce said, gritting his teeth. “I’m not leaving you behind!”

“Then you get off the horse, and let me go first!” Zhou Yu couldn’t resist shouting.

Sun Ce blinked.

“There’s a copse of trees ahead!” Sun Ce said loudly. “Be careful!”

The horse beneath them dashed into the forest. There was a series of clatters and clangs as Sun Ce led them on a twisting, winding path through the woods. Every time Zhou Yu thought the two of them would smash

straight into a tree, the white piebald managed to twist its body out of the way by a hair's breadth.

Even as preoccupied as Sun Ce was, guiding his horse, he had the spare time to chat. "There are less than five horses that can outrun my beloved steed. I can count them all with one hand…"

"My only worry is that one of those is pursuing us," Zhou Yu replied.

But the landscape disagreed with their idle chatter. The woods suddenly flattened out, and Sun Ce roared, "Watch out!"

With a long whinny, the horse with its two young riders burst out from between the trees, sketching an arc through the air as they fell toward a creek glimmering with thousands of rays of golden sunlight.

Someone by the creek shouted, "Who goes there?!"

"We've been driven into an ambu—"

Before Zhou Yu could finish his sentence, they crashed into the water.

Thankfully, both were adept swimmers. Only moments after they plunged in, both their heads popped up through the water's surface. Zhou Yu's heart stopped. An ambush in front of them, or the mass of troops in pursuit behind. This time they were truly stuck between a rock and a hard place.

Sun Ce stood up out of the water as the creek was only waist-high.

The two sloshed a few steps forward, only for a voice to threaten: "Don't move!"

"At least let us get on dry land first!" Sun Ce shouted angrily back, disheveled.

"Stay in the water," a man said from nearby.

Sun Ce and Zhou Yu turned at the same time, only to lay eyes on a martial general and a white horse standing in the creek. The martial general's completely black hair was long but wet and tied loosely, his upper torso bare. Not even sparing them a glance, he wrung the water out of an inner robe.

“What brings you here?” he said, finally leveling his gaze on the two of them.

Despite his apparent youth, the martial general looked heroic. His features were gentle, and below the well-proportioned muscles of his back and chest, he only wore a pair of long white pants embroidered with lifelike depictions of coiling dragons in black thread.

Neither Sun Ce nor Zhou Yu responded to his question, and so he led his white horse up onto the bank. A set of silver armor was drying on a rock, and a long spear lay to one side.

Zhou Yu roughly had an idea of what happened. This martial general had been all on his own, with only his horse for company. When Zhou Yu and Sun Ce came barging in, he had been washing his horse and taking a bath.

“Ignore him,” Sun Ce said quietly. “Let’s get out of here, quick.”

The other man, his feet bare, walked to the bank, his eyes locked on the two of them. Sun Ce wanted to lead his horse out of the water as well.

“You aren’t with the Liang Province troops?” Zhou Yu asked before Sun Ce could move.

“Answer my question first.” His gaze shifted from Zhou Yu to Sun Ce before moving on to their horse.

Sun Ce immediately realized—he could be on their side, one of their own! He must have been sent here.

“Is the general from the allied troops? How should this one refer to you?” Sun Ce asked. “I am under the command of the Changsha Prefect Sun Jian—”

He was interrupted as someone darted out of the forest. Zhou Yu’s and Sun Ce’s expressions instantly changed, and they and their horse clambered speedily up onto the bank.

“Still trying to escape, brats?!” a voice called from within the trees.

The martial general picked up his silver spear and stepped forward.

Words rang out from another martial officer, this one wearing a set of fully black armor, as he charged out, riding a prized Akhal-Teke horse. The

warhorse released a long whinny as it reared back, remaining on the northern bank of the creek. Over a hundred archers faded in behind him.

“None of you shall escape!” he roared.

The bare-chested martial general stepped in front of Sun Ce and Zhou Yu, shielding them.

From the southern bank, a dense mass of white-armored archers appeared, pointing their arrows at the forces on the opposite side. The two armies, separated by the creek, stood in a temporary stalemate.

It was obvious to Zhou Yu why they hadn’t been able to escape their pursuers. It wasn’t because Sun Ce’s horse was slow, but rather because their luck was as bad as it could be.

The man was wearing a set of black scale armor, his head clad in an iron helmet that bore a pheasant plume. He was over seven feet tall and held the famed Fangtian Halberd. His nose was hooked like an eagle’s beak, and his eyebrows were as sharp as a sword’s edge. A resentful expression rested in his gaze, and the horse he rode was exactly one of the five that could catch up with Sun Ce’s: the divine Akhal-Teke breed, the Red Hare that could race even the wind.

Were they destined to fall into Lü Bu’s clutches this time? Who would have thought he would chase after them in person?

Zhou Yu turned his head carefully, studying the other side, his hands slick with sweat. He worried the white-armored troops were not Lü Bu’s enemies. Then he remembered what he’d seen just as he entered Sikang. Weren’t these white-clad soldiers part of that army he witnessed crossing swords with Lü Bu’s cavalry?

Sun Ce didn’t know the two sides had fought before.

In a grave tone, he spoke to the bare-chested martial general in front of him. “General, this is the General of the Household, Lü Bu. You must be extremely careful.”

The martial general who was protecting them seemed to hardly register his words. Under the light of the midday sun, his kind eyes held not even a trace of fear as he faced Lü Bu.

The corners of Lü Bu's mouth twitched slightly, and his eyes narrowed. With a single command, both sides would rush at each other, hacking and slashing, dyeing the waters of the creek red. But he did not give the order.

Instead, he let out a cold chuckle. "Zhao Zilong, you want to go another round? Why don't you get dressed first?"

The martial general gripped his silver spear. "You shall not take these two away, for they are my allies. But if the General of the Household wants to attack, then this general will naturally meet you in kind."

That provoked an uproar from both sides, but Lü Bu stepped forward. He pointed his Fangtian Halberd right at Zhao Zilong.

"The other one can go, but this general will take Sun Jian's dog of a son. Hand him over and we can pretend that you and I never saw each other here today."

"No," Sun Ce said. "I won't go back with you."

"Shouldn't you call me Shifu, disciple?" Lü Bu asked, menacingly.

Zhou Yu started, turning an incredulous gaze to Sun Ce, who merely cupped his hands and bowed. "Shifu, this disciple cannot go with you."

"You're the disciple of the General of the Household?" Zhao Yun watched Sun Ce warily.

Sun Ce could only grit his teeth and carry on.

Lü Bu said coldly, "Sun Jian promised he would send his son to join my riders, so he could learn their skills. But he changed his tune, and very quickly at that. I'll keep his son hostage and let you all go, so go."

Lü Bu's words were arrogant.

"I'll take his place," Zhou Yu said.

"It's you again," Lü Bu said, looking at Zhou Yu. "Who exactly *are* you?"

"You will not." Sun Ce stopped Zhou Yu.

"General of the Household," Zhao Yun said sternly, saluting him firmly but modestly, "this cannot be settled until I return and report to General Sun and the commander of the alliance. I cannot release them until

then. If I do not make my report, neither can leave with you. I apologize for the offense.”

Lü Bu flew into a rage, but Zhao Yun remained as steady as a mountain, standing in front of Sun Ce and Zhou Yu like a protector god.

He continued slowly, “If the marquis wants to force my hand, let us have a showdown. Three rounds. If the marquis is able to win, then I will step aside and remove myself from this situation. How does that sound?”

Lü Bu had fought as he pleased for over ten years, and no one had yet dared to challenge him to a fight. But he had suffered defeat at the foot of Hulao Pass, and now this arrogant fledgling with barely any reputation here was asking for a beating. How could he let that go?

“This marquis will fight three rounds with you! All of you, step back!” Lü Bu hollered.

All the troops retreated, and Zhao Yun lifted his long spear, walking into the shallows. Zhou Yu and Sun Ce held their breaths.

Before Lü Bu could attack, a messenger stepped up, hurriedly whispering a few words into his ear. His expression immediately darkened.

“Looks like these three rounds must wait. I will allow them to leave with you today, but we will decide the victor of our bout one day in the future! Men! Move out!”

True to his word, Lü Bu and his men left, withdrawing into the trees like they had never been there in the first place. Zhao Yun kept his hand on his silver spear, eyes trained on Lü Bu’s shrinking silhouette, as if expecting him to rush back. It wasn’t until he confirmed the Liang Province troops had indeed retreated that he released a breath of relief.

“Were you the decoy meant to lure him away?” Zhao Yun asked Zhou Yu.

“We weren’t.” Zhou Yu was very confused.

“Someone else probably ambushed that procession,” Sun Ce guessed.

Zhao Yun finally went to put on his clothes. Sun Ce and Zhou Yu thanked him, but Zhao Yun waved away their appreciation.

“It cost me next to nothing to do, so no need to mention it. Since we are allies, naturally we should help each other.”

***

By noon, Zhou Yu and Sun Ce had assimilated into Zhao Yun’s troops. After they each filled in one another on details, Zhao Yun explained he was under the command of the White Horse General, Gongsun Zan. He had come on Yuan Shao’s orders in pursuit of the remnants of Dong Zhuo’s armies but had received secret orders along the way to hold his troops in place. Gongsun Zan wanted him to lie in wait outside Hangu Pass for reinforcements to arrive instead.

“What we don’t know is who took this opportunity to ambush the cart procession,” Zhou Yu said, trying to survey the situation at a high level.

Sun Ce shook his head. “We missed the prime opportunity to ambush them.”

The cart procession had already traveled too far beyond the pass, and since they’d startled Dong Zhuo the first time, Lü Bu had probably put defenses in place.

“I heard Cao Mengde was leading a group of men this way in hopes of rescuing the emperor,” Zhao Yun said. “I’m afraid he may not have succeeded either. The speed which they are traveling at now is not one an army can hope to keep up with. Let’s go.”

The pair followed Zhao Yun’s troops through the pass. After they crossed, they bade each other farewell. Zhou Yu once again tried to express his gratitude, only for Zhao Yun to deflect it. Zhao Yun turned and headed back toward Luoyang.

Sun Ce cheerfully watched Zhao Yun leave. As soon as he was out of earshot, Zhou Yu’s expression immediately tightened.

“Lü Bu is your *shifu*?!”

“Didn’t you hear him? Lü Bu treated me pretty well; before our two sides started fighting I was thinking of asking him to escort you out of Luoyang.”

“That won’t fly anymore,” Zhou Yu protested, but he was resigned.

Earlier, Zhao Yun had filled them in on how the Battle of the Hulao Pass turned out. They only secured a victory because Sun Jian viciously changed sides, and his men met Lü Bu’s troops head-on, unflinchingly. The Tiger of Jiangdong’s reputation was proven once more. He actually sent Lü Bu’s elite cavalry scurrying away. The only concern now was that Lü Bu would capture Sun Ce and use him as a hostage.

***

In the shadow of Hangu Pass, the weather changed, as if a storm of torrential rain was brewing.

The next day, traveling on separate horses, Sun Ce led Zhou Yu to the market that had been set up at the foot of the pass. He spoke with the guards there, who proceeded to bring out six large carts, four horses, and a group of merchants.

Zhou Yu was dumbstruck.

Sun Ce smiled. “I found your missing horse carts. Hua Xiong originally took them, and I had to lead my men in and give them a good fight before I could snatch them back.”

The merchants came forward, each gratefully thanking Sun Ce. Zhou Yu was at a loss. After searching his thoughts for a long time, he came up with nothing.

“Oh, forget it. Now we can finally head back and hand over our earnings.”

“Don’t be in such a hurry,” Sun Ce protested. “When will you return? Let’s decide on a time and a place, so we can easily meet again.”

“After I return home, unload all the goods, and see each of them home safely, I’ll head your way. I will never be able to repay the debt I owe you, even if I had ten lives to spare. I shall not shortchange you on this contract of servitude.”

Sun Ce laughed loudly and clapped Zhou Yu’s shoulder.

***

The sky was starting to lighten, but the stars still shone. Sun Ce kept Zhou Yu company the entire way to Hangu Pass, and when they arrived, he offered his reins. “Take my horse.”

The two of them exchanged mounts. Sun Ce added, “Take Fei Yu with you. If anything happens, send it my way with a message.”

Zhou Yu accepted the bird from Sun Ce.

“Sun Bofu,” Zhou Yu said without warning, turning his horse around.

Sitting astride his steed, Sun Ce watched him with a careless air.

He grinned. “Don’t miss me too much.”

“I will come back,” Zhou Yu promised.

He rode several dozen feet away, but Sun Ce couldn’t hold himself back any longer.

“Zhou Gongjin.”

Zhou Yu reined his horse to a stop, turning his head back casually, meeting Sun Ce’s gaze.

Time seemed to ebb and flow around them. Countless years appeared to pass like the ever-surging tide, the roll and retreat of waves. Flames blazed across the sky, and beacon-fires lit the land. All of that swept by in the span of a single inexplicable, indescribable gaze.

No matter how many years passed, Zhou Yu still remembered the way Sun Ce looked that daybreak, his silhouette lit by the stars above and the dawn behind. He still remembered the look in his eyes.

They were half filled with the brightness of day and half with the darkness of night. The light of the new day was breaking over the horizon, and a single thread of twilight stretched taut between the two of them. The shadows cast by the mountain range whirled slowly across the land, moving with the brilliant, blinding light of the blazing, newborn sun.

“Are you willing to stand with me, hand in hand, shoulder to shoulder, to conquer the world?” Sun Ce asked, face solemn. “That is all I shall ask. But if you come, you shall not be able to leave.”

Zhou Yu met his gaze. “I know.”

“If you are agreeing because you fear you owe me a debt,” Sun Ce added, “then forget it—let’s not speak of this any longer. I, Sun Bofu, have not done these things because I wish to take advantage of you.”

“I know,” Zhou Yu repeated, calm and composed. He replied slowly, “I am willing to come to your side and assist you, not because of this debt.”

“Then why?” Sun Ce asked.

“Because I think highly of you,” Zhou Yu said. “Perhaps, there will come a day when the entire world is your Sun family’s. Before that day comes, let’s see how far we can go. What does this tiny debt count for in the grand scheme of things, right?”

Sun Ce smiled. “You’re willing to come?”

“I’m willing,” Zhou Yu said. “Jia!”

The white piebald swung around, racing after the tail end of the caravan, vanishing into the depths of the vast mountain’s forest.

***

It was late autumn, and on the road back to Shu County, a downpour began. It took only three days after Zhou Yu left for him to feel regret. The road was nothing but mud, and the weather was turning cold. Every time the wheels of the carts sank into the mire, the entire group would need to shove the cart to free it.

Zhou Yu thought to himself that if he had known earlier, he would have accepted Sun Ce’s offer of troops to escort them. But if Sun Ce left his post without permission again, Sun Jian would give him a disciplinary beating upon his return. Ever since the day he met Sun Ce, Zhou Yu had brought him endless troubles, so if he could decrease that by even just a little, it was worthwhile.

Zhou Yu’s frame was large, and he was strong, so as the caravan traveled, he helped push the carts like everyone else. But with such a deluge, he was often utterly drenched. On the journey, he devoured ginger soup to ward off the cold, afraid he would fall ill before he got home.

The trip took half a month, and the weather fluctuated between good and bad. Originally, after bringing the caravan back to Shu County, he planned to head at top speed toward Shouchun, where Yuan Shu was, to await Sun Ce’s arrival. But if he fell ill, he might need to spend months recuperating…which gave Zhou Yu a headache whenever he thought about it.

Though they ran into countless dangers on the way, they thankfully managed to return safely in the end. When they arrived in Shu County, they caused a stir throughout the small town.

Zhou Yu, wholly exhausted, returned home, where his mother awaited him.

“You’ve returned?” Madame Zhou asked.

“I’ve returned,” Zhou Yu said. “All the carts are back, and no one is missing either.”

Outside was a constant stream of people coming to their door to give thanks. Madame Zhou had worried while he was away, but now that her son was home, she was finally relieved of that weight. She returned to her rooms to change into a set of formal robes before walking out into the yard to greet the people.

“Madame Zhou!”

“Young Master Zhou.”

“The Zhou family has shown us great kindness…”

Madame Zhou indicated they shouldn’t speak just yet, and she knelt down and kowtowed to the villagers.

The entire courtyard flew into an uproar. Zhou Yu hurried to steady his old mother before also dropping to his knees to kowtow three times to their fellow villagers.

“My son has lived in Shu County all his life,” Madame Zhou said earnestly. “All of you old neighbors and fellow villagers took care of him,

and the silk store could only have reached the success it enjoys today because of the efforts of everyone here. Our contribution is what you deserve from us, so how can we allow you to thank us for simply doing our duty?

“After my husband bade farewell to the world, we relied on all of you. I should be the one, on behalf of my deceased husband and my naive child, thanking everyone for their constant support and kindness.” Madam Zhou smiled. “Dear villagers, please return home and let us not speak of any further debts. If anything arises on a day-to-day basis, then please, do let us know how we can be of use.”

Everyone went through another few rounds of thanking each other before finally leaving their presents and returning home.

***

That night, Madame Zhou watched Zhou Yu’s face closely under the lamplight, patting his head as she sighed. “The Sun family sent an envoy to me with the news, which is the only reason Mom was able to sleep these past few days.”

Zhou Yu described his voyage to Luoyang to her.

As he spoke, she seemed to remember something. “The Qiao family sent someone asking after your well-being and whether you had returned from Luoyang. It seems like Prefect Qiao was very worried.”

Zhou Yu nodded, and for a time, the mother and son did not speak.

A long while later, Madame Zhou rose, watching the rain fall outside beyond the corridor. “We truly cannot repay the kindness the Sun family has shown us this time. Bofu is a good child, and ever since he came to our house years ago, your dad thought well of him. General Sun has also cared for us…”

“Bofu wouldn’t hear anything of debts,” Zhou Yu said, sipping a mouthful of warm tea. “Mother, I made him a promise. It’s about time I head to Shouchun.”

“You did exactly as you should have,” Madame Zhou replied. “In these two years, Mom always worried over you, but I can finally relax after hearing your words. I do not worry that no one out there will take care of you, but I did worry you would waste your youth looking after the family. I was concerned you would lead a life without any achievements and let your potential slip through your fingers.”

“Mother.” Zhou Yu’s eyes grew wet.

Madame Zhou smiled wanly, sitting down again. “When your father was alive, he and General Sun were good friends. Now his son is grown, as is mine. Though my son may not show more promise than General Sun’s, he still understands what he should do and has his own ambitions. In these years, Mom saw how you acted at home. Although you claim you are running the business and taking care of family matters because someone has to, Mom knows you are not doing what you actually want to do. Isn’t that right?”

“But I can’t help worrying about you,” Zhou Yu replied. “I do not even know if the Changsha prefect will remain in Shouchun for long.”

“Go wherever you wish, even to the ends of the earth. If you aren’t able to stop worrying about me, then when the time comes, I will sell off the store and go with you, a roll of bedding under my arm. Your father was a good man, and my son will achieve something great as well. Haven’t you heard what they say? Every man has two people who believe, without a shred of doubt, that he is an incredible person. The first is his mother, the second his wife.”

Zhou Yu was so tickled by that he began to chuckle.

“All right. Tomorrow I will set off, but while I’m here…”

“No need to worry,” Madame Zhou said. “When you are out there, make sure you are a good person and diligently do what you set out to do. Mom is happy to stay at home and hear about your adventures, though I will always look forward to seeing you. When I eventually arrive in Shouchun, it would be nice to hear people praising your name. Isn’t that how it should be?”

Zhou Yu’s eyes welled with tears, and he nodded, watching her.

Madame Zhou patted Zhou Yu’s head, then pulled him into a hug.

***

Originally Zhou Yu planned to set off to Shouchun the next day, but the cold claimed him. He only held out so long through sheer willpower and the medicine keeping it suppressed. Now that he finally had a moment to catch his breath, he grew feverish that very night, and he fell horribly ill.

The next day Madame Zhou couldn't wake him, and his forehead sizzled with heat. She knew this was not to be taken lightly and hurried to send for a renowned doctor to treat him. The estate bustled with activity for days. When Lu Su heard that Zhou Yu had returned home, he came to visit but was immediately sent up the mountain for the master monk. A flurry of doctors came and went, prescribing medicines and performing acupuncture, and only after exhausting a great deal of their skills did they manage to reduce the severity of Zhou Yu's condition.

But even as he was so sick he was barely aware of what was happening around him, Zhou Yu was still thinking of how he had promised to meet Sun Ce one month later. He was afraid he would miss the date, and several times he attempted to get up and leave. Lu Su was forced to knock him flat with a solid punch to settle him down.

***

"How gone are you on Sun Bofu?" Lu Su asked, sitting at Zhou Yu's bedside, chopping up a piece of ginseng.

Zhou Yu shot him an angry glare, all bark but no bite. His throat ached with a fiery pain, and his nose was stuffy. He didn't have the energy to taunt him back.

"What position did the Sun family promise you?" Lu Su asked.

Zhou Yu didn't respond.

"How much food?"

Zhou Yu didn't make a sound.

“Marquis over how many households?” Lu Su continued.

Zhou Yu blinked.

“You think you’re Xiao He, the hero of the Han Dynasty?” Lu Su asked. “Is a bit of sweet-talking all you need to throw your lot in with him?”

Zhou Yu responded, “Can’t you be quieter? Be careful not to cut your hand.”

Lu Su chuckled to himself. “If the Sun family is the type to go ahead and declare themselves king, do you think you’re the kind who can see through their motives and use them to further your goals instead? You think you’re Li Si, Han Fei, Huo Qubing, Bai Qi, Han Xin, or Lu Buwei, those famous founders of the Qin Dynasty?”

Zhou Yu frowned. “Lu Zijing, your tongue seems to be a little sharp these days,” he replied weakly.

Lu Su didn’t speak, instead moving to cut the ginseng. Zhou Yu stared up at the canopy of his bed, mind wandering.

A moment later, Lu Su continued. “If they aren’t power-hungry pretenders to the throne, then what are you joining them for?”

“Sun Bofu is not like that.”

Lu Su smiled. “I’ll bestow upon you a saying: Be wary and protect yourself.”

“Thanks,” Zhou Yu responded. “Though your words are unpleasant, I know you’re saying them for my good.”

Primly and properly, Lu Su placed the ginseng slices into the teapot and set it to brew. As night fell, he climbed onto the bed, falling asleep next to Zhou Yu.

Early the next morning, Zhou Yu drank the ginseng soup and gathered up his travel funds. His face was still pale from his lingering illness, but he was afraid of waking his mother, so he’d decided earlier to take his leave of the fog-shrouded valleys of Shu County alone.

“I’m leaving. Take care of yourself,” Zhou Yu said.

“Be careful on the road,” Lu Su said. “If anything happens, send us a message.”

Lu Su moved into Zhou Yu’s house that day. After Madame Zhou rose in the morning, it was Lu Su who greeted her. That was how Madame Zhou came to find her son had left on his journey, despite his illness, and she could only accept it.

“He hadn’t recovered fully,” Lu Su said, “but I couldn’t persuade him to stay.”

“Ah well. Let him go,” Madame Zhou replied. “He has the same temperament as his father. Such an explosive, fiery temper. Oh well, oh well…”

Lu Su slowly smiled.

***

Zhou Yu was traveling north to Shouchun, but this time, his emotions were a stark contrast to what he felt when he previously set out. He was wrapped in a thick fur cloak with a wolf-pelt hat on his head. The foggy breaths he huffed out dissipated in the clear morning of the white winter day. The air of the wilderness was crisp and clean.

The cloth bundle he brought held four hundred heavy taels of gold packed within. Shouchun was just a few days’ journey away. Over a month had passed since the various marquises rose against Dong Zhuo, and though they entered Luoyang as an alliance, they parted in discord, squabbling over the division of the spoils. Each returned to their own territories.

Zhou Yu brought the letter of recommendation Lu Su wrote, and as soon as he entered Shouchun, he found it majestic and open, not at all like what he remembered from his childhood.

Shouchun was located on the north side of Shu County, and it was one of the largest cities in Yang Province. Ever since the King of Huainan, Liu An, was assigned this region, rumor had it that the dragon pulse running through Mount Bagong to the north bestowed various benefits on Shouchun, leaving its winters warm, its summers cool, and the waters of its

spring cold and clear. People gathered, and in less than a hundred years, this place had become a major trading hub and a land that abounded in plenty.

As it was early winter, the residents both inside and outside the city were finished with harvesting and planting for the year. They settled into their homes and trades, and the flames of war on the Central Plains seemed to be very distant from this place. Permeating the city was the same auspicious atmosphere as the area around Wabu Lake.

Zhou Yu led his horse, passing through a prosperous, busy market. He asked after Sun Jian's troops as he went, but no one knew anything, so Zhou Yu instead headed toward the regional government office, figuring he could use Lu Su's letter there. After the official saw the letter of recommendation, Zhou Yu explained why he had come. That same afternoon, he received a summons and returned to the Shouchun government office.

Apparently, Yuan Shu was trying to ward off the chill of winter at the Shouchun government office. After he returned from fighting Dong Zhuo, Yuan Shu claimed this estate for himself, the General of the Rear.

As soon as Zhou Yu entered, soldiers came forth to lead him into the main courtyard before handing him over to an office clerk in charge of registering arrivals. Within the courtyard, there were classical styled alpine gardens, and water burbled constantly in the background. Green pines transplanted from Mount Bagong filled the front courtyard, and based on their trunks, he could tell each one was over a hundred years old.

The clerk explained, "The General of the Rear is currently discussing matters with the prefect of Wu county, Xu Gong, Lord Xu. Zhou-gongzi, please wait a moment."

Zhou Yu nodded, and a servant brought in snacks, letting Zhou Yu take his tea in the entrance hall. He looked over the decorations around him—all these tables and chairs likely amounted to the profit of several small cities. Even the short table in the gatehouse was carved from pomegranate wood, and the jade vases and ivory sculptures placed on the shelves were probably plundered from Luoyang.

Zhou Yu's family was rich too, but he never unabashedly enjoyed anything this luxurious. While he was alive, Zhou Yi had warned him time and again that even if a family's wealth was vast, it was nothing compared

to possessing a wellspring of knowledge. Because he saw more and more of such luxuries on a regular basis, Zhou Yu couldn't help but be a little disconcerted.

***

It wasn't until the sky darkened and the lamps were being lit through the estate that someone finally came for Zhou Yu. He wasn't angry, however. He waited there calmly the entire time. If Sun Ce had been in this situation, he might have gotten up and left in frustration. But Yuan Shu was no ordinary official, setting his own lack of actual post aside. Even if his father, the former prefect of Luoyang, had been here, he also would've waited.

Before he left, his mother reminded him more than once to remember what kind of a person his father was, to consider how he dealt with problems and how he acted as an official.

After Zhou Yu set off, he reminisced about his father often. If he were with him on this journey, what would he do? What would he say? It gave him the patience to sit there in the lobby, waiting an entire afternoon.

When the lamps in the lobby were lit, a servant summoned him. "The general is requesting Zhou-gongzi's presence."

Yuan Shu had finally cleared some time to see him. Back when he was living in Shu County, he often heard of Yuan Shu's reputation as a seeker of talent. If Zhou Yu were trying to gain a position here, his chances would be slim at best. But asking Yuan Shu to offer temporary lodging would not be an issue.

"Oh, Zhou-shizhi!"

Before Zhou Yu even set foot over the threshold, he heard the rich voice of a middle-aged man call out to him from the main hall, and he knew that man was Yuan Shu. Zhou Yu trained his expression and entered, appearing happy and collected. Dirt from the dusty roads sprinkled off his robes as he properly greeted Yuan Shu with a kowtow.

"Young nephew greets Yuan-shibo."

“Quickly, rise, please rise.” Yuan Shu stepped forward to lift him to his feet.

To one side, there was another middle-aged man who laughed loudly. “As I thought. Nice to see you again.”

Looking over, Zhou Yu realized it was none other than his old acquaintance, Qiao Mao. Zhou Yu and Qiao Mao both sighed upon seeing each other. Qiao Mao’s beard and hair were grizzled, and he was trembling faintly. For a long while, he couldn’t speak.

Finally, he said to Yuan Shu, “In the midst of the sea of flames that was Luoyang, Nephew Zhou gave the single steed we had for this old man to escape. After returning to Yang Province, this old man, clinging onto life, constantly regretted allowing that…”

“All right, all right!” Yuan Shu said, smiling, waving a large hand. “He’s back now, so there’s no need to say more! Come, Zhou Yu, this is Xu Gong, Uncle Xu. Back in the day, he was on good terms with your father.”

Yuan Shu introduced Zhou Yu to another middle-aged man. Knowing that this was the prefect of Wu County, Xu Gong, Zhou Yu greeted him accordingly. Xu Gong nodded his head, and Yuan Shu took Zhou Yu’s hand, showing him to his seat.

Zhou Yu’s forebearers were officials, and his grand-uncle, Zhou Jing, was at one time the Grand Commandant. If Zhou Yu wanted to trace through his family connections, they were related to the Yuan family in that way. As expected, Yuan Shu first brought up his family’s friendship with Zhou Yu’s grand-uncle, and then, in accordance with etiquette, brought up various matters Zhou Yu’s father dealt with while alive.

“As for your father’s passing, I was originally going to visit in person to give my condolences,” Yuan Shu said, “but for some time, I was unable to take my leave…”

“Back then, when the General of the Rear’s envoy visited, my mother was greatly moved,” Zhou Yu hurried to say. “The first thing she wanted me to do when I arrived in Shouchun was to come greet Uncle Yuan.”

Yuan Shu laughed loudly and applauded. “Just now, I heard old Qiao mention what I noticed as well: You’re young, talented, handsome, have the

courage to sacrifice yourself to save others, *and* you managed to escape from Luoyang. You're an admirable young man!"

Xu Gong and Qiao Mao both started laughing. Zhou Yu hurried to decline such praise, but just as he was about to bring up Sun Ce, he saw a hesitant glance from Qiao Mao. He decided not to mention he came to see Sun Jian.

"Zhou Yu," Yuan Shu said, delighted. "What plans do you have for the future?"

Zhou Yu, who was sitting at one of the side tables meant for visitors, lifted his eyes to take in Yuan Shu. The man's features were well-formed and his build burly. He kept his beard elegantly long, and a white jade tablet hung at his waist. With the set of long robes he wore, his demeanor inspired admiration.

"I have no plans right now," Zhou Yu responded earnestly. "As of today, the emperor is displaced from his throne, and the law has not adequately punished Dong Zhuo. Though the world watches with anticipation for Uncle Yuan to take up this heavy duty, this young nephew came to Shouchun simply hoping to assist in whatever way is possible."

Yuan Shu sighed. "Your willingness is a rarity these days! You do not shame your deceased father's name. But there are many conflicts to deal with, and even my Yuan family is powerless in the face of those… Oh well! Let us not speak of such things today. I am pleased you are here: Seeing you is like witnessing your father in the past. Over these next few days, come stay in Uncle's residence. Come! Set out the wine!"

With that, Zhou Yu relaxed; Yuan Shu had accepted him. After all, though his reputation was middling among the various marquises, Yuan Shu was highly regarded among scholars as someone who appreciated talent and gathered the knowledgeable in his retinue. Anyone who did as he did would be well-known, but this was especially true for large families such as the Yuan.

That night, Yuan Shu ordered the servants to lay out a banquet, and with Xu Gong and Qiao Mao in attendance, they enjoyed wine and made merry. Zhou Yu didn't dare speak out of turn, so he merely smiled and kept them company. It wasn't until the meal ended that Qiao Mao grabbed Zhou Yu's arm and gave him some advice, adding that in the coming days, he

would find Zhou Yu for a more detailed chat. Yuan Shu was still clutching his wine cup, tottering around on unsteady legs, requesting a few more drinks together.

Zhou Yu hurried to steady him. But as soon as Xu Gong and Qiao Mao left, Yuan Shu recovered—he was not drunk at all.

“Zhou Yu, come with me,” Yuan Shu ordered.

Yuan Shu was treating him as one of his own, so Zhou Yu followed along into the study in earnest. Yuan Shu first asked in detail how Zhou Yu’s family was doing, so Zhou Yu untied his bundle and handed over Lu Su’s gift. He placed it in front of Yuan Shu.

“This is a little something my mother wanted me to give Uncle.”

“Ah.” Yuan Shu glanced inside, only to see a Night-Luminous Pearl. He waved for a servant to stash it away. Zhou Yu stood silently by Yuan Shu’s side, not saying more.

“How is your study of the Confucian classics?” Yuan Shu asked.

“I cannot allow my father’s legacy to go to waste, so I review them regularly.”

“You’re well-versed in the teachings of Legalism[22] as well?”

“Yes,” Zhou Yu replied respectfully.

“Uncle will test you, then.”

Zhou Yu ground some ink for Yuan Shu, and with a swirl of his brush, Yuan Shu wrote a test question. As Zhou Yu expected, the question was regarding the union of “understanding classics” and “understanding laws” that often came up in the regional examinations. As Zhou Yu read it, he understood Yuan Shu was trying to determine what official position would be suitable for him. With that in mind, he took the scroll and sat to one side, lifting his brush as he composed his essay.

At first, when his brush landed, his motions were somewhat choppy, but as time went on he wrote faster and faster, and he finished with an exhale. If this had been an official examination, the test wouldn’t have been combined but split into the two subjects. Confucianism and Legalism needed to be applied together for maximum effect, and the problem Yuan

Shu gave him included both. Zhou Yu took the question seriously and answered it as best he could.

Yuan Shu narrowed his eyes, a cup of tea near his hand. He mostly observed Zhou Yu's expressions instead of his writing.

"You sit up straight, and you are tall. The line of your back is very pretty," Yuan Shu suddenly said, before laughing loudly.

Feeling awkward, Zhou Yu responded, "Uncle is praising me too much."

"When you were small, your father disciplined you quite a bit, didn't he?" Yuan Shu remarked, still laughing.

Zhou Yu chuckled. "Yes, when I was small and learning to write characters and compose essays, my back often met his paddle."

"Hmm," Yuan Shu hummed. "Not bad. A handsome, skilled youth. Talent and looks, how lucky."

Zhou Yu smiled humbly, and the study quieted once more. After a few more minutes, Zhou Yu turned in his response, offering it up with two hands to Yuan Shu. Composing an essay wouldn't stump him easily, and Yuan Shu only glanced over the beginning before calling someone in.

"Bring this essay to Yang Hong for him to read."

Yang Hong was an aide under Yuan Shu's command, and Yuan Shu would basically wait for Yang Hong to assign Zhou Yu a post.

"Why don't you keep me company as we stroll about the garden?" Yuan Shu said.

Zhou Yu swiftly rose to his feet.

The lamp lights brilliantly pierced the darkness, and Yuan Shu, hands clasped behind his back, walked in front of him, while Zhou Yu followed respectfully. Yuan Shu thought for a while.

"Since the Marquis of Mei fled to Chang'an in the west, how do you see the situation in Luoyang developing?"

Zhou Yu considered this deeply. "Though Luoyang is the capital, in reality, that fire destroyed its importance. Instead, Nanyang's relevancy has risen, because historically it was a land strategists fought over…"

“You’re correct,” Yuan Shu said. “I’ve sent Sun Wentai to Nanyang. As of now, he is keeping his troops there, awaiting my orders. Luoyang is rubble; it will not be restored to its former glory for a long time.”

“If Uncle is interested in gaining Luoyang, he can order General Sun to press ahead to Yangren County, then split his troops and send a group to conquer Hangu Pass,” Zhou Yu said. “Aside from that Han loyalist Ma Teng in Liang Province, if any of the various marquises wish to mobilize their men against Dong Zhou, they will need to travel through Hangu Pass.”

Yuan Shu sighed. “That Sun Wentai doesn’t listen to orders. It’s not as easy as you say.”

“Are the Sun family’s troops currently stationed in Luoyang?” Zhou Yu asked.

Yuan Shu hummed, mulling over something.

“After Dong Zhuo kidnapped the emperor and fled west, Luoyang instantly lost all value. Xu Province and Jing Province became the regions of strategic importance. As this young nephew sees it, it’d be better to order General Sun to temporarily fall back to Nanyang County,” Zhou Yu supplied.

“Liu Biao will not easily relinquish Jing Province,” Yuan Shu said. “That old fox, in the Coalition Against Dong, refused to go and do battle. Do you think he would surrender if I were to issue a writ of amnesty?”

Zhou Yu shook his head. “Sooner or later, Jing Province will be fought over, but it’s better later than earlier. Liu Biao is of the royal family, and he is insistent on defending his claim to the throne. At the heart of it, he won’t stand on anyone’s side. If we attack now, we would only lose the support of the people.”

Yuan Shu smiled and stroked his beard. Clearly Zhou Yu’s assessment of the battle situation had not met Yuan Shu’s expectations, and Zhou Yu couldn’t help but sigh.

“It is what it is,” Yuan Shu said warmly to him, unwilling to elaborate. “You should rest. Tomorrow, I will send someone for you.”

With that, Zhou Yu and Yuan Shu bowed and bade each other farewell.

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After returning to his room, Zhou Yu realized he was completely exhausted, and this was only his first day in Shouchun. The servants had brought his belongings in, but instead of unpacking, Zhou Yu immediately went to pen a letter to Sun Ce. He ripped it up, wrote another, tore it up again, then tossed the entire sheet of paper into the brazier and let it burn. In the end, he only wrote a few short, simple words:

Already arrived in Shouchun. Come quickly to meet me.

Fei Yu flapped its way out of Yuan Shu's residence while Zhou Yu sat beside the window. He was staying on the second floor of a building in a side courtyard, and from here, if he pushed open the window, he could see the entirety of Shouchun buried under the snow, tranquil and elegant.

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In the early morning of the next day, the aide of the General of the Rear's estate, Yang Hong, sent a runner with a message. Zhou Yu was to see him after breakfast. Yang Hong was sharp, and a cunning light shone in his eyes. As he discussed matters with the senior officers under his command, he also assigned Zhou Yu an official's position and issued him a command tally.

Zhou Yu would be an Officer of Records. His primary role was overseeing the promotions and transfers of the various officials in the city. This posting gave Zhou Yu a preliminary understanding of how Yuan Shu saw him. After the events of yesterday night, according to his essay and their discussion, Yuan Shu had put him in the same category as his father Zhou Yi. This job, where it was easy to offend others and difficult to be biased toward any side, suited the morally upright, outspoken scholarly type.

Since things were already moving along, he would wait here for Sun Ce and take this opportunity to familiarize himself with the system of

officials.

Zhou Yu took up his role that day; there were three people total in the Office of Records, and they usually didn't rise until the sun was high in the sky, nor did they do much on a day-to-day basis. When Zhou Yu organized the dusty, stacked volumes of recommendations for promotions, he learned Yuan Shu appointed people wholly based on his impression of them. This role of the Officer of Records was basically a government position in name only. For the most part, Yang Hong, Yuan Yin, and the rest of them, through their speculations on Yuan Shu's mood, would order the Office of Records to compose articles of accusation and send them forth.

Zhou Yu was happy to be given so much free time, so he settled in easily. The estate was overstaffed, and every action moved at a cumbersome pace, but the pay was high. Yuan Shu was evidently willing to spend the money to support his subordinates living idly. He also gave Zhou Yu three hundred and twenty stones of grain, which Zhou Yu had absolutely no use for. He spent a while needlessly worrying about it. With all the people here, could the grain tax Yang Province generated be enough to feed them all?

Several days later, Fei Yu brought back a letter.

The situation in Luoyang has changed. I must stay for a while longer. The days are growing cold. Take care of yourself, and as soon as I am able, I will take my leave and come to Shouchun. Bofu

Zhou Yu's forehead furrowed; Sun Ce wouldn't make it back for a while, so he had no choice but to let things hang for now. He wrote a note on his paycheck and sent it back home. In Yuan Shu's residence, his food and lodgings were taken care of, and he wasn't mistreated, so at least for now he wouldn't need to touch the grain.

A letter came from home, penned by Lu Su on behalf of his mother. Everything was well, and the letter told him to mind his conduct during his stay in Shouchun. It also mentioned the changing situation in Luoyang. Only Sun Jian's men, of all the allied troops, were left, perhaps because his achievements were so great they threatened his superior's position.

Once in a while, Zhou Yu would glean an inkling of knowledge based on the comings and goings around him, as well as the changing of appointments. He heard people in the estate mention Sun Jian's troops

remained outside of Luoyang, holding their position all this time. Despite Yuan Shu sending orders to recall him, Sun Jian refused to mobilize.

One day, Zhou Yu passed through the back garden to see Yuan Shu fervently discussing something with another middle-aged man; realizing these words were not meant to be overheard, he attempted to leave unobtrusively.

But the other middle-aged man noticed him. “Who goes there?”

Zhou Yu couldn’t hide. He could only cross through the corridor, enter the garden, and cup his hands in a bow to the pair of men.

“This is Zhou Yi’s son,” Yuan Shu said, with a pleasant expression. “Come, Zhou Yu, come recognize your uncle Yuan Shao.”[23]

“Young nephew greets Uncle Yuan,” Zhou Yu said.

Once he learned this was Zhou Yi’s son, Yuan Shao’s suspicions faded. Zhou Yu noticed a child under ten years old was standing by Yuan Shao’s side, holding his hand as he looked up at Zhou Yu.

“Come, Nephew Zhou,” Yuan Shu said, “take this little fellow on a walk around the estate until the sky grows dark, then take him to the Eastern Gardens for his meal.”

Zhou Yu nodded. The child shot Zhou Yu a look before glancing back at Yuan Shao. This was likely Yuan Shao’s grandson. Zhou Yu reached out to take his hand. He seemed clever and followed obediently behind Zhou Yu as they crossed the corridor, taking their leave.

Yuan Shao continued to argue with Yuan Shu.

“How much use can a single piece of jade be?”

“It’s not just any jade!” Yuan Shu was clearly angry as he replied. “The way that bastard’s squirreling it away clearly shows he’s not taking us seriously. If we don’t recall him, is he going to force a coup and declare himself the new emperor?”

When these words traveled through the courtyard, Zhou Yu felt his soul leave his body.

“Did you hear what they said?” the child asked.

“Shh.” Zhou Yu hurried to quiet him, leading him through the corridor. “I’m called Zhou Yu, courtesy name Gongjin,” he said, once they were clear. “What’s your name?”

“This humble one is Cao Pi. My father is Cao Cao, courtesy name Mengde,” the little boy replied, cupping his hands together as he greeted him ceremoniously.

Surprised, Zhou Yu asked, “Why have you come to Shouchun?”

Zhou Yu’s emotions were jumbled; he had not only seen Cao Cao but now his son. Though Cao Pi was still young, his actions and mannerisms were very similar to his father’s, and his features were very fine. When he grew up, he would be stunningly striking.

“My dad mentioned you before,” Cao Pi continued, dignified. “On behalf of my father and my family, allow me to thank Master Gongjin for saving his life…”

“Please, rise.” Zhou Yu couldn’t suppress his amusement. This kid had a prudent little head on such young shoulders, and he couldn’t help his admiration. He replied earnestly, “It was a trifling matter, nothing worth mentioning.”

Zhou Yu and Cao Pi walked through the corridors before stopping in a secluded spot where Zhou Yu fell deep into thought. Judging from his expression, Cao Pi gleaned something was weighing on him.

“Are you worried about the issue with General Polu?”

This line of inquiry suggested to Zhou Yu that Cao Pi might know something more.

Zhou Yu simply replied, “The recent news from General Sun does not seem very good.”

“Not only is it not very good,”—Cao Pi smiled, shaking his head a little helplessly—“he found the imperial jade seal in Luoyang.”

Zhou Yu was stunned into silence. Cao Pi watched him with anticipation, studying his face in the hopes of learning something. But Zhou Yu was completely frozen as he thought back on the exchange he just heard between Yuan Shu and Yuan Shao. A piece of jade, but not simply a piece of jade… Damn it, he should have thought of this possibility long ago.

“Yuan Shao wants his older brother to bring Madame Sun to Shouchun,” Cao Pi said. “Are you familiar with the Sun family?”

“Y…yes.”

Zhou Yu pushed aside his original hesitation at being so open with Cao Pi. After all, why was Cao Pi here, at Yuan Shao’s side? He was likely a hostage… The two of them exchanged looks, and Cao Pi’s eyes filled with amusement. Zhou Yu immediately understood—right now, the two of them were allies.

This kid’s future is limitless, Zhou Yu thought.

“Has Yuan Shao discovered that you eavesdrop on his conversations?” Zhou Yu asked.

Cao Pi watched the dragonflies in the courtyard and reached out to catch one. “He isn’t on his guard around me at all; he treats me like a child.”

Zhou Yu began to chuckle, and his mood improved greatly.

“Sun Ce and I are childhood friends,” Zhou Yu said. “What he’s tangled up in is not trivial. I have to think of a way to deal with it.”

“They’ve already sent people to escort Madame Sun here, so she won’t be able to escape. I’m still planning how to get out of Shouchun. My dad said he’ll send someone to retrieve me, so there’s a strong possibility we won’t be able to leave right now.”

“Let me handle it,” Zhou Yu promised. “I’ll figure out a way. What did Yuan Shao tell your dad?”

“He sent my dad to fight his battle for him,” Cao Pi said, helplessly. “Plus, he’s holding me hostage here.”

Zhou Yu stroked Cao Pi’s head. “You’re too cunning, you little brat.”

Cao Pi had been paying attention ever since he heard Yuan Shu introduce Zhou Yu to Yuan Shao. Additionally, he knew of that months-old incident when Zhou Yu had sent Cao Cao out of Luoyang. Cao Pi quickly confirmed Zhou Yu was an ally. And now he had secretly revealed all of Yuan Shao’s plans to Zhou Yu, so the two of them stood on the same ground.

In less than the span of time it took to drink a cup of tea, Cao Pi had made a careful and complicated conclusion. Zhou Yu couldn't help but admire this child.

"I must write a letter first," Zhou Yu sighed, his worries weighing heavily on his mind.

Cao Pi nodded and followed Zhou Yu back to his quarters. While Zhou Yu composed his letter, Cao Pi regarded Fei Yu curiously. Though he seemed dependable, in the end, he still had the heart of a child. He played with Fei Yu for a while.

"Is this a falcon?"

"Yes," Zhou Yu said. "It's the only one of its kind in the entire world."

Cao Pi replied, "It was probably highly treasured by the Sun family patriarch, right? It must have been difficult, taming this bird."

"That's correct," Zhou Yu responded. "I need Sun Ce to come to Shouchun as fast as possible. Only then can we get you out of the city without alerting Yuan Shao."

"My father returned unscathed all thanks to you," Cao Pi said, smiling. "Now you're saving my life as well. I don't know how I can repay you."

"Fate controls the course of our lives, and success is up to the heavens to decide," Zhou Yu replied. "I am doing no more than following the will of the heavens."

Zhou Yu released the white falcon, and it shot out, vanishing into the sky. A patch of fiery clouds hung on the horizon, as if they were an extension of the endless fires of war, stretched across the skyline itself.

Twilight fell, and Zhou Yu closed the window. He would've never thought that many years later, on an evening much like this, Fei Yu would bring back memories of a time so long ago.

"How about I show you a great beauty, Zhou-dage[24]?" Cao Pi asked, speaking as if he were deep in thought after lifting his brush and penning a few lines.

"No need," Zhou Yu replied.

“She’s gorgeous.”

“No matter how beautiful, I’ve seen greater.”

“She’s even prettier than you.”

Zhou Yu almost choked on his tea, but Cao Pi continued, “It’s a pity she’s already married; otherwise I would marry her.”

“How old are you?” Zhou Yu responded. “Knock it off with that kind of talk.”

“My dad said every person possesses a love of beauty.”

Zhou Yu blinked.

Later, Zhou Yu brought Cao Pi to the Eastern Gardens, where the brothers Yuan Shao and Yuan Shu were drinking and chatting. A young woman sat there, her face half covered, a gaggle of serving women surrounding her. When she turned, her features were clean and beautiful under the flickering oil lamps. With her allure alone, she could bring ruin upon entire cities and countries.

When she saw Zhou Yu she bowed slightly, before addressing Cao Pi. “Where did you go?”

Cao Pi smiled. That innocent expression didn’t match the precocious personality he displayed earlier.

“Cao-gongzi spent some time reading books in my quarters,” Zhou Yu explained.

The boy introduced them. “This is Zhou-dage.” Then, to Zhou Yu, he said, “This is Zhen-jie.”

As he’d led Cao Pi here, Zhou Yu learned Yuan Shao also brought his son and daughter-in-law with him. His daughter-in-law was this picture in front of them, Zhen Mi.

Zhou Yu didn’t dare to look at her too long, but Cao Pi smiled happily.

“How is she, Zhou-dage?”

“Stop your nonsense,” Zhou Yu whispered awkwardly, “before I have to take the fall for your actions.”

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A few days later, Yang Hong sent someone with a proclamation. They had to gather all the official documents in the estate and deal with any that related to military reports. This was not something Zhou Yu should have been involved in, but among the documents to be drawn up was a letter of indictment pertaining to Sun Jian and his son. They were handed over, along with Sun Jian's rations records. Zhou Yu knew then this was not a trivial matter. If there were no provisions on the front lines, the troops could mutiny at any time.

He said to Yang Hong, "Great Chief Secretary, the way I see it, this __"

"If I tell you to write, then write," Yang Hong said. "You think Sun Wentai is so poor he won't have anything to eat? It's a test. Do you not even understand that much?"

Zhou Yu put down the brush. "I cannot write this if it is about him. Since the general is in the field, there are some commands he cannot follow, so how can you withhold his troops' provisions?"

"You won't write?" Yang Hong didn't think a lowly Officer of the Records would dare to defy him. He stared at Zhou Yu for a while. "Very well. Remember, you made this choice."

All of his colleagues turned, gazes resting on Zhou Yu. He was about to put his brush down and leave. But he worried about Sun Ce's safety too. After some hesitation, he reconsidered.

"I beg your pardon, my lord. I'll write it right now."

Yang Hong glared at him angrily, but a subordinate rushed over and murmured a few words into his ear. Yang Hong rose and left. Apparently a visitor had arrived, and he had no time to spare raging at Zhou Yu.

He thought for a moment before lifting the brush and starting to write. Weighing the advantages and disadvantages of his actions, he understood that though writing this indictment was an order from Yang Hong, in reality, this was going to Yuan Shu. Yuan Shu had long since

decided on how he was going to deal with this, and a simple letter of indictment wouldn’t change his mind.

Zhou Yu ended up penning in the disadvantage Sun Jian would be at due to the delay of those needed provisions, in an attempt to sway Yuan Shu’s decision.

He finished the letter, affixing it with the seal of the Office of Records. Once he’d sealed it up he came out, hoping Yang Hong would be too late to have time to open it. He left the hall.

A heavy snowfall began that night just as a horse carriage arrived from outside the estate. Zhou Yu shivered, feeling a vague sense of unease. He wanted to follow the carriage and learn what was going on, but Yang Hong approached with orders from the opposite direction.

“Zhou Gongjin, take that letter of indictment and come with me.”

Yang Hong didn’t have time to open it. Zhou Yu was sure his previous rejection had offended him. Getting him to personally deliver the letter to Yuan Shu was Yang Hong’s way of driving Zhou Yu into a corner. Thankfully, Zhou Yu had been cautious—he hadn’t mentioned Sun Jian’s activities. If he was to see Yuan Shu, he would be able to explain the contents of the letter. Unafraid of Yang Hong, he followed him into the main hall.

Under the dim lights of the hall, Yuan Shu and Yuan Shao sat, drinking wine. Yang Hong bowed before speaking. “Greetings to Zhugong. Greetings to Lord Yuan.”

Zhou Yu followed suit. “Greetings to Zhugong.”

Yang Hong shot Zhou Yu a look. “The Office of Records concluded our investigation. Sun Jian is indeed disloyal. He often says to his subordinates that since the imperial jade seal is already his, he will one day hold the greatest treasure.”

Though Zhou Yu’s heart stuttered with fear, his expression did not belie even a bit of his unease as he handed the indictment to Yuan Shu. An angry huff exhaled from Yuan Shu. He was ready to make his decision, and evidently it was not favorable to Sun Jian.

“In your opinion, how should this be dealt with?”

“Summon him back. If he does not return, no further discussion is necessary,” Yang Hong replied.

“What if he is willing to round up his troops and return?” Yuan Shao asked. “You’ll need to think about how to deal with him then.”

“Both his wife and son are here,” Yang Hong said. “Tell him he should bring himself and his son back, so the entire family can reunite for the new year. He will have no choice.”

“Since things are how they are,” Yuan Shu said, not sparing a single glance at the letter on the table, “you take care of this.”

Zhou Yu chose then to speak. “Zhugong, this one has some words to say, but he does not know if he should.”

As one, the gazes of Yuan Shu, Yuan Shao, and Yang Hong all converged on Zhou Yu.

“If this one may speak directly,” Zhou Yu said. “Sun Jian does have a lot to answer for, but his men will eventually desert if they are not issued provisions. If they rise up in revolt, and the Changsha Army manages to escape blame, that will be more costly for Zhugong than the current state of affairs.

“Since Zhugong already has a method of resolving this future headache,” Zhou Yu continued tactfully, “why not continue to send provisions so his troops can stay? That will make it easier for someone else to go assume command in the future. Even if they want to rebel, they won’t have a reason.”

From his expression, it was clear Yuan Shu was unwilling to bend, but Yuan Shao stepped in.

“You make a good point. Dealing with this situation requires both kindness and cruelty: offering kindness to the Changsha troops with one hand while cowing the Sun family’s father and son with the other. You are correct.”

With some hesitance, Yuan Shu accepted Zhou Yu’s reasonable proposal. “Let’s do as you say.”

Zhou Yu took his leave. Yang Hong was in charge of dealing with the provisions, and it wasn’t something Zhou Yu could worry over. If he asked

anything more, he would be overstepping his bounds. He strode rapidly back to his quarters just as Fei Yu returned, bringing with it Sun Ce's letter.

In it, Sun Ce mentioned he knew it was improper to hide away the imperial jade seal, but he couldn't persuade Sun Jian otherwise. He was afraid Yuan Shu had already started to grow suspicious, so he asked Zhou Yu to help him keep things under control. Zhou Yu smiled a little helplessly, but bitterly, and he immediately burned the letter before penning a response for Fei Yu to carry back.

Cao Pi, his chin cupped in his hand, watched him from the corridor.

"I saw Sun Jian's wife and son being brought here," he remarked.

"Was that their horse carriage?" Zhou Yu asked, without lifting his head.

Cao Pi replied affirmatively, then said, "Is Yuan Shu going to call him back, then find an opportunity to kill him?"

Zhou Yu looked up wordlessly at Cao Pi. As Cao Pi stepped inside, he leaned on Zhou Yu's shoulder to read the letter he'd written.

"What are you planning to do?" Cao Pi asked.

Though Zhou Yu had wanted to keep him ignorant at first, he had a sudden change of heart. If everyone was in the same boat now, informing him was no issue.

"General Sun Wentai cannot return," Zhou Yu replied. "Yuan Shu will not dare touch his family, but only if Sun Jian keeps his troops out in the field and they receive proper rations."

"Hmm," Cao Pi mused. "That makes sense. If I were Yuan Shu, I wouldn't use such a stupid method."

"Thankfully you're not Yuan Shu, otherwise things would be troublesome indeed," Zhou Yu replied. Cao Pi giggled, and Zhou Yu asked, "Have Madam Sun and her child been put under house arrest?"

"Zhen-jie is keeping her company, and the little kid is called Sun Quan; he caught a cold as soon as he got here. Zhen-jie won't let me see him, so now I'm *really* bored."

"Lead me there so I can check on them," Zhou Yu said.

Zhou Yu outlined the changes occurring in Shouchun in great detail before letting Fei Yu fly off with his letter.

He and Sun Ce were apart more often than not these past few months, so Zhou Yu couldn't help the anxiety that filled him. Sun Jian stubbornly refused to hand over the jade seal. Zhou Yu was afraid it was already too late for this situation to be remedied. All he could do was assess the advantages and disadvantages of each option and tell Sun Jian that no matter what he did, setting foot in Shouchun was suicide. The entire Sun family would be trapped, and every single member would be murdered.

Yuan Shu wanted nothing more than to erase their whole family.

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Zhou Yu frowned deeply as he followed Cao Pi into the Eastern Gardens. There he saw Zhen Mi chatting with a middle-aged noble lady.

"Are you Zhou Yu?" The woman started to smile.

Stunned, Zhou Yu asked, "You recognize me?"

"You're the son of Zhou-laoye, are you not?"

That noble lady was Sun Jian's wife, Sun Ce and Sun Quan's birth mother, the Lady of Wu. She came forward and took Zhou Yu's hand, smiling.

"You were small the last time I saw you. Look at you! You've grown so tall! Every time Ce-er is home, he never stops talking about you. I never expected to see you here."

A hint of worry creased Zhou Yu's forehead. "Greetings to Madame Sun."

"You can call me Aunt," the Lady of Wu replied.

Zhou Yu nodded, but just as he was about to open his mouth again, he remembered Zhen Mi was standing to the side, and he didn't dare say too much in front of her. The Lady of Wu sensed his hesitation; understanding leveled over her face.

Zhou Yu found an excuse. "Where's Didi?"

“Didi is ill,” the Lady of Wu said. “Why don’t you check in on him? I’ll be there in a bit.”

A serving girl came and led Zhou Yu into the back courtyard of the Eastern Gardens. The Lady of Wu’s expression was placid, and she smiled faintly as she and Zhen Mi chatted idly.

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A small child lay in the room situated at the back courtyard, his face flushed red with fever and burning hot to the touch. He was about the same age as Cao Pi.

“A chill invaded his body,” Zhou Yu said.

It was the same illness he himself had caught previously. Cao Pi slumped at the side of the bed, and after Zhou Yu made his pronouncement, he glanced at him.

“Amazing! You can even diagnose illnesses? You just need to flip his eyelids up and then you know what’s wrong?”

Before Zhou Yu embarked on his journey, Lu Su wrapped four bundles of medicine for him, which he had specially prepared. However, Zhou Yu’s health was usually good, and he never touched them.

He told Cao Pi, “Go into my room and bring me the bundles of medicine up on the very top of the shelves.” Zhou Yu stroked Sun Quan’s head. “All is well. After you take the medicine, you’ll recover.”

Lying there, Sun Quan panted, his lips a vivid red. The wind must have gotten to him on the way here. The sight of little kids sick often tugged at the heartstrings of adults around them. Cao Pi returned shortly with the medicine, and Zhou Yu brewed it in the room, exchanging the medicine Yuan Shu’s subordinate concocted for the mute monk’s blend. That night, he poured it down Sun Quan’s throat.

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The Lady of Wu came to check on him, and Zhou Yu took the opportunity to fill her in on the current situation. The lady's face was grave when she heard the news, and she didn't say a single word.

"Yu-er," she asked, after his explanation, "as of right now, do you have a way to leave?"

"Fei Yu took a letter," Zhou Yu reported. "I must remain in Shouchun for the time being, to prevent any mishaps."

"That'll work," the Lady of Wu sighed. "With both father's and son's explosive tempers… All right, thank you for the information. Fei Yu flies faster than a human can travel, so it will definitely catch up to them."

Zhou Yu's heart was heavy with concern. He had to take care of Sun Quan, but he also had Yuan Shu's actions to worry about. The thing he was most afraid of was that Fei Yu would not make it in time, and the situation would devolve into a bloodbath.

Cao Pi patted Zhou Yu's shoulder. "Relax. Everything will be all right."

Zhou Yu smiled.

"Do you know how to treat migraines?" asked Cao Pi.

"I don't. Why? My medical skills are limited to common illnesses and external wounds."

Cao Pi blinked, nonplussed. He frowned for a moment. "My dad gets very bad migraines."

"I heard that there is a famous doctor wandering the world," Zhou Yu said after a minute of thought. "His name is Hua Tuo. If you can find him, he might have a method of treatment."

"When are you sending me out of the city?"

"Patience. I must find aid before I can send you to your dad's side."

"Will that be Sun Ce?"

Zhou Yu didn't respond.

"It seems he'll be hard-pressed to keep his head attached. Can he actually escort me out? If not, I'll have to think of something else."

“What ideas are you considering?” Zhou Yu was already familiar with Cao Pi. He never minded the difference in their ages. “You think you can walk back on your own into your dad’s camp?” he scoffed. “You probably don’t even know where he is.”

“Ah,” Cao Pi sighed. “The affairs of the mortal world, both joyous and sorrowful, are like the dew of the morning, vanishing under the sun, and the years that have passed have been painful… A pity, a pity.”

“Who taught you this stuff?”

“My dad.”

Feeling as if he had lost to Cao Pi somehow, Zhou Yu said, “Wait for a little while longer; there *will* be an opportunity. We cannot act hastily.”

Cao Pi nodded.

At that moment, Sun Quan woke.

“Big…Big Brother…” Sun Quan gasped, trying to rise. Zhou Yu hurriedly pressed on his small shoulders, forcing him to lie back down.

“Have you sent a letter to my brother?” Sun Quan asked.

Sun Quan had probably overheard some of their conversation just now, so he needed soothing. “Fei Yu is on its way. Fei Yu is faster than a human; your mother said so.”

Hearing that, Sun Quan nodded. “Thank you…”

Even though Sun Quan was ill, he was still frowning. Zhou Yu reasoned it was because he wasn’t comfortable with this situation either.

He thought to himself, *Why do all these kids now have such old souls?*

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The night passed, and by the time dawn broke, Sun Quan was improving already. His forehead was no longer hot. This comforted Zhou Yu enough to return to his room to sleep.

For several days, they received no news at all, and Fei Yu didn't return either, exacerbating his worries. He didn't dare get too close to the Lady of Wu.

One day, when he saw there was no one in the war chamber, he took the risk and entered. As he flipped through the military reports on the advisor's desk, he found Yang Hong must still have borne a grudge, because Sun Jian's provisions were being held, the order unsent.

Zhou Yu gathered his courage, forged Yang Hong's name, and approved the documents, stuffing them into the very bottom of the stack to be sent out.

A cold sweat suddenly overcame Zhou Yu, and he strode out rapidly, only to run into someone in the corridor.

"This little brother, may I ask…" the man began politely, but when the two of them looked at each other, both froze.

"Zilong?" Zhou Yu asked.

"Gongjin?" Zhao Yun blinked.

"Why are you…"

"Zhugong sent me with a letter for General Yuan. I waited an entire day, but he was busy with other matters, so he was unable to meet with me…"

An idea immediately came to Zhou Yu. "Did you come alone?"

"With General Sun's son, Bofu," Zhao Yun replied. "He is currently meeting with General Yuan in the hall."

Zhou Yu and Zhao Yun waited under the eaves of the corridor. A second later, Fei Yu flew down from the rooftop, alighting on Zhou Yu's shoulder.

From within the hall came Yuan Shu's infuriated shouting, followed by the shattering of a cup. He was currently venting a torrent of anger on Sun Ce and his dad. Zhou Yu sucked in a deep breath. It didn't appear this was going to be resolved soon.

"Zilong-xiong, can you help me out with something?"

Zhao Yun replied, “Please, speak freely, without fear of consequence.”

Running into Zhao Yun had given him an idea: Zhao Yun was clearly the best choice to help them, because no one would ever suspect him.

“Let me take you to see a young friend.”

Zhou Yu decided to first take care of Cao Pi. Since Sun Ce had come, he had already received the letter, and as Sun Jian hadn’t come with him, matters were still within their control.

Zhao Yun followed Zhou Yu through the back courtyard, into the flower gardens, only to see two kids rolling around in the mud, squirming and wrestling.

“You were raised by a turtle!” Sun Quan’s voice squeaked angrily.

“Hurry up and say uncle!” taunted Cao Pi.

Zhou Yu shouted, “Both of you, stop!”

The two adults rushed forward to separate them; Zhao Yun grabbed Cao Pi, while Zhou Yu pulled Sun Quan away. The two kids’ faces were still bright red with exertion. Their behavior exasperated Zhou Yu.

“This young…friend,” Zhou Yu said to Zhao Yun, “I’ll leave to you. You two should become familiar with each other.”

“What caused you to get into such a fight?” Zhao Yun asked. “How can you use your fists without exchanging words first?! Come with me.”

“What are you going to do?!” Cao Pi struggled against him, refusing to listen.

“I’m going to teach you a lesson,” Zhao Yun replied.

Zhou Yu glanced at Cao Pi. When their gazes met, Zhou Yu could tell Cao Pi suspected Zhao Yun was the “help” Zhou Yu had invited. He gave up on the fight and went with Zhao Yun to wash his face.

On his end, Zhou Yu brought Sun Quan inside and handed him over to the Lady of Wu. When he left again and returned to the room, he saw there was someone standing in the flower garden, who, without saying a single word, leaped toward him, arms wrapping tightly about him a mutual embrace.

In that instant, Zhou Yu’s vision almost blackened entirely from relief.

“Thank the heavens and the earth, you have finally come.”

“Thankfully, I got your letter,” Sun Ce said. “My dad was about to mobilize his troops and march them here.”

Zhou Yu gritted his teeth. “What exactly were you two having a spat over?”

“I have the jade seal with me,” Sun Ce said, “but I didn’t hand it over.”

Zhou Yu’s brain malfunctioned.

Chapter 4:
Breakthrough

"A CITIZEN IS NOT GUILTY of his own accord, but if he carries the jade, he will be found guilty. You must hand over the jade seal, immediately."

"You're kidding, right…?"

"Do you know how long I've been waiting here for you? You think I'm joking? Neither of you should have come back; things would be fine if you hadn't come back! Yuan Shu hates the Sun family's guts!"

"My dad sent me to put this all to rest. I shall not hand him the imperial jade seal. I can guarantee he won't be able to get it, so it'll be easy to—"

"Put this all to rest? What a joke! You think Yuan Shu will listen to you? You think that if he caught you, he wouldn't have you searched?!"

"Zhou Gongjin, I didn't expect this. Can't you say something nice?!"

"Here I was, worried to death about you. Who do you think you are?!"

"You… Stop! Zhou Gongjin! You'd treat the person who saved your life like this?!"

"You guys…stop fighting!" Sun Quan shouted. "I'm going to get Mom!"

Zhou Yu's fingers twisted around Sun Ce's lapels as he shoved him up against a pillar. He growled through gritted teeth, "Do you know how precarious your situation is…?"

"Shut up!" Sun Ce roared, flying into a rage. "To rise up against me now, you're— Zhou Yu!"

Sun Ce harshly shoved Zhou Yu aside. Seeing things weren't improving, Sun Quan turned and ran. As their fists found each other, Zhou Yu and Sun Ce began to scuffle right there in the garden.

A sudden realization hit Sun Ce: He had no reason to be fighting Zhou Yu.

“You’ve gone mad!” he shouted. As he tried to scramble away, he said, “I’m not fighting you anymore!”

Zhou Yu yanked Sun Ce back a few times, trying to hold him in place, but Sun Ce dragged himself away every time. Unable to hold himself back, Zhou Yu wrenched Sun Ce’s belt forward and then kicked him from behind.

With a splash, Sun Ce fell into the pond. He slapped about in the water a few times, bedraggled, before rising to his feet.

“I see now! You’ve come to get your revenge!”

Zhou Yu didn’t speak. He simply stood on the bank, watching. The scene had alerted quite a few onlookers, and even the Lady of Wu had noticed. From a distance away, she chided Sun Ce, “Ce-er! What are you doing?”

Zhou Yu continued to stare at Sun Ce without offering a hand. Sun Ce groped around in his robes, only to find something was missing. Zhou Yu raised his eyebrows, and it abruptly occurred to Sun Ce what the other man had done.

Finally, Zhou Yu reached out a hand and tugged Sun Ce out of the water. He turned his head back and glanced at the pond, but he didn’t say anything more.

***

In Zhou Yu’s room two hours later, the light smoke of incense wafted through the air, its light dully illuminating the two men within. Zhou Yu sat at the desk, reading a book, while Sun Ce soaked in the bathtub. He released a sigh of great exhaustion.

Zhou Yu dismissed the serving women outside the room. “No need to wait on us any longer.”

“Yes, Lord Officer of the Records.”

As the serving women left, they shut the doors. It was only then that Zhou Yu put down his book and came over to wash Sun Ce's back. Sun Ce's sculpted, powerful muscles were exposed above the rim of the bathtub, gathering drops from his soaking wet hair.

"Since you're here, how long are you prepared to stay in Shouchun?" he asked.

"I'm leaving after we celebrate on the fifteenth of the first month," Sun Ce replied lazily. "My dad had me—"

Zhou Yu dipped his finger in the water, and on Sun Ce's naked shoulder, he wrote: *The walls have ears*.

Sun Ce's nape and back were dotted with water droplets and sweat. Since it was winter, steam rose from the hot water, condensation dewing on their eyebrows and lashes.

Sun Ce continued, "He had me come here for approval on sending the Changsha Army out after the new year to besiege Chang'an…"

"Ah," Zhou Yu responded mildly. "Then hopefully you rest well over these next few days."

Sun Ce raised his eyes to look at the eaves. The corner of a robe flashed past. He moved his hand to rest in front of him while Zhou Yu squeezed out the green juice of honey locust pods to wash his back with. Sun Ce gave the back of Zhou Yu's hand a gentle pat; he could rest easy.

Zhou Yu rolled up his sleeves, taking a seat in the corridor outside as he scrubbed away the mud on Sun Ce's martial boots. With a splash, Sun Ce climbed out of the tub, standing buck naked in the doorway.

"Put some clothes on!" Zhou Yu shouted, infuriated.

He rose to go beat up Sun Ce, but Sun Ce quickly and agilely nabbed his robe, shrugged it on with a few quick motions, and fled.

***

That night, Sun Ce took Zhou Yu to formally pay their respects to the Lady of Wu. Zhou Yu knew Yuan Shu was suspicious of him; his intimate

scuffle with Sun Ce immediately upon his return was like telling Yuan Shu he answered to the Sun family.

This was equivalent to strapping himself to the Sun family's sinking ship, but there was some benefit—it served as a slight warning. No matter what, Sun Jian and Sun Ce had an ally in Great General Yuan Shu's household able to carry out tasks for them. Whatever means Yuan Shu could use against Sun Ce could not be too brazen.

The topics of conversation between Sun Ce, his mother, and his little brother Sun Quan were limited: how the winter chill had set in, how Sun Ce's health was, how much he ate usually, and if he was in any trouble, as well as anything relating to the troops. As for the jade seal or Yuan Shu, neither matter was brought up. At this moment, the jade seal sat, submerged, in the pond outside the small side courtyard where Madame Sun resided. Zhou Yu had used the fight as cover, so none had seen his concealed actions; no one knew it was there.

Late that night, Sun Ce and Zhou Yu passed through the corridor to return to their rooms. Their wooden clogs quietly clacked against the hallway floor. A crescent moon appeared over the distant mountains. Sun Ce sensed hidden eyes all around them, watching their every move.

"After the Shangyuan Festival is over, let's leave together," Sun Ce suggested.

"Where to?" Zhou Yu asked. "Changsha?"

Sun Ce thought before responding. "Wu Commandery."

"I feel that Shouchun's pretty good, actually."

With a grin, Sun Ce lifted Zhou Yu in an embrace.

"Put me down!" Zhou Yu protested. "How do you think this looks?"

One tall, sturdy man hugging another through the corridor… Zhou Yu was happy but embarrassed.

"Do you know how our Changsha Army drafts strong men for military service?" Sun Ce said. "Well, it can't be helped. You didn't join up…" He continued, "First they pick you up, like this. Then they truss you and toss you onto the back of a horse…"

"Let go of me, Sun Bofu!" Zhou Yu shouted.

Just as Sun Ce was invested in teasing him, they heard the sounds of several people walking from the other end of the corridor. The two hurried to separate themselves. A lantern in the leader's hand lit up a little less than half of the corridor.

"Zhugong." Zhou Yu hurried to make his greeting.

"Mm." Yuan Shu's face was impassive.

When Sun Ce raised his eyes, he saw quite a few people collected there—Yuan Shu, Yuan Shao, Yang Hong, and several advisors and generals under Yuan Shu's command. They all stood in the corridor.

"Uncle," Sun Ce greeted him.

Yuan Shao smiled. "You two have such a good relationship. How nice."

“Please excuse our behavior,” Zhou Yu replied mildly. “My father and Uncle Sun were old acquaintances.”

Yuan Shu grunted in acknowledgment. His eyes remained cold as he smiled. “It is getting late. You two should turn in now.”

Zhou Yu murmured in agreement and stepped aside, waiting for the group to pass.

When Yuan Shu brushed by him, he said, “Starting tomorrow, you no longer need to go to the Office of Records. There will be a new post for you once spring comes. You’d best work hard, young man.”

“Yes sir,” Zhou Yu replied.

Yuan Shu patted his shoulder, but as he did, Zhou Yu felt a wave of murderous intent. When he straightened up, he saw that they were all staring at him.

Yuan Shu didn’t even waste words on Sun Ce and left on his own. Sun Ce’s lips twitched. Evidently someone offered up an opinion on him behind his back, and Sun Ce’s expression flickered as he dragged Zhou Yu back into his rooms.

After they returned, a quiet noise came from the roof. Neither of them raised their heads, and Sun Ce, acting as if there were nothing wrong, sat down on the bed, smiling. He kicked off his wooden clogs, crossed his legs, and started to boil some water for tea.

“The general’s estate would never deprive you of food, so you’d better offer up whatever you have.”

Zhou Yu casually pointed under the bed. “There are tea cakes in the box.”

Sun Ce glanced at it, only to see signs of disturbance. Before they left, he’d watched Zhou Yu mark it, just in case. It was evident the entire room had been searched. He thought about how Yuan Shu and Yuan Shao ran into them and knew it was probably they who had sent people to conduct the search. Maybe the brothers hadn’t been convinced, so they came in person to oversee.

Sun Ce’s expression was unpleasant, but Zhou Yu smiled slightly. Straightening his sleeves, he sat down, lifting the kettle to pour some water

into a cup for Sun Ce's tea.

"Are you unhappy?" Zhou Yu's eyebrows twitched.

"What did you call him again?" Sun Ce's expression was pure displeasure. Zhou Yu didn't know what grievance he was hung up on now.

"I don't remember. How about I call you Zhugong?"

Sun Ce shook his head helplessly, and the two stared at the teapot in silence. After finishing his tea, Zhou Yu let out a yawn.

"I'll leave you to your own devices. I'm tired."

"Then let's sleep together," Sun Ce suggested.

Zhou Yu cleaned up the bed, and they pulled one blanket over their bodies as they pressed together to sleep. Zhou Yu's bed was tiny, and they both had large builds, so they ended up with their hands and feet pressed together. A few more sounds drifted in from outside, and Sun Ce's eyes raised to look at the ceiling.

"It's winter," he said, amused, "and yet there's still so many rats."

Not expecting such a comment from Sun Ce, Zhou Yu chuckled out loud.

Sun Ce continued, clearly entertained, "Tomorrow we need to inform the great general, so he can bring the infestation under control."

"You brought the rats with you," Zhou Yu replied. "I've lived here over a month and never saw one, but as soon you came—rats. Make sure you aren't bitten in your sleep."

Sun Ce's expression shifted, and he narrowed his eyes, noticing the moonlight shining in under the eaves was a little brighter than it had been moments before.

Sun Ce held his breath, but Zhou Yu pressed his hand down on Sun Ce's, shaking his head lightly.

The assassins outside the room seemed to be waiting for something, but Zhou Yu knew Yuan Shu wouldn't be able to kill them yet. After all, he hadn't discovered the whereabouts of the jade seal, and if he killed Sun Ce, it was no different than directly attacking Sun Jian. Emboldened, Sun Ce looked away with a laugh.

After about five minutes, Zhou Yu's ears twitched as he heard the sound of a bamboo whistle from afar. A good portion of the assassins on the roof left, but surely a few remained, tasked with eavesdropping.

Sun Ce's bath had left him smelling clean and manly. He clutched Zhou Yu's hand tightly as they rested.

In the second half of the night, Zhou Yu spoke in a small voice. "Are you asleep?"

"No," Sun Ce said quietly, before he rolled over and squashed Zhou Yu underneath him.

Zhou Yu had not been expecting this.

Sun Ce had squished Zhou Yu's entire body beneath him into an odd position, and they were pressed ear to mouth. Sun Ce's eyes cracked open, and his soft lips moved carefully.

"One to the left, three to the right."

"They've all fallen asleep," Zhou Yu whispered. "There's one left by the fence in the backyard who's listening in…"

"What do you want him to hear?" Sun Ce asked lightly, right into Zhou Yu's ear. "Gongjin, you smell pretty good. It's exactly like what I remember from when we were kids."

"Oh fuck off…" Zhou Yu swatted away the hand that was groping around and replied under his breath. "I have a plan that can get you, Sun Quan, and the old madame out peacefully. Want to try it?"

"Speak." Sun Ce wrapped one arm around Zhou Yu's waist, and he slung his leg over his body, the two of them entwined. Sun Ce smiled. "I knew you'd have a plan."

"Stop wasting words… What are you doing? Stop that!" Zhou Yu hissed. "If you keep making a scene, I won't tell you."

Sun Ce froze in position and didn't move a single muscle. Zhou Yu whispered a few instructions, and Sun Ce's eyebrows furrowed.

"Think it through," Zhou Yu said. "You must not hesitate. Otherwise, even a resurrected Zhang Zifang[25] would not be able to help you."

“But what if you were trying to kill me instead?” Sun Ce asked earnestly.

Zhou Yu’s expression grew stern, and he stared into Sun Ce’s eyes.

Sun Ce smiled. “Even then, I’d only be able to deliver myself to your doorstep and present my neck.”

Mustering all his strength, Zhou Yu kicked Sun Ce off the bed.

Sun Ce hurried to beg for mercy. “We’ll do as you say…”

***

The afternoon sun that filtered through the panes of Yuan Shu’s room cast a dim, grayish light throughout the room.

Outside, a heavy snow was falling, and Zhou Yu rubbed his bright red hands together. A layer of frost had formed over his hair, eyebrows, and lashes as he stood in front of a stove, shivering nonstop.

“Zhou Yu, what have you been up to?!”

Yuan Shu just woke from his midday nap, and he sat, relaxed, on the seat. Zhou Yu’s teeth kept chattering. In the span of a single night, a wave of icy cold had enveloped the entirety of Shouchun. He was really suffering for this plan.

“Zhugong,” Zhou Yu said, voice trembling, “you must not let anyone know about this, otherwise Gongjin’s lowly life will be forfeit…”

As he spoke, Zhou Yu placed a rectangular package, wrapped in yellow cloth and dripping wet, in front of Yuan Shu.

“This…”

It was Yuan Shu’s turn to shudder. He looked toward Zhou Yu, who mustered up enough strength to nod.

Yuan Shu’s voice trembled. “Sit, quickly, sit… Where did you get this?!” Zhou Yu sat to one side while Yuan Shu continued, “Servants!”

He covered the package with a cloth as he called for warmed wine to be brought and for Yang Hong to be summoned. It took a while for the

orders to be executed. Zhou Yu sipped the warmed wine, easing away the chill in his bones. Yuan Shu had his servants bundle Zhou Yu in a blanket, his face glowing red.

All the servants were then sent away, and on the short table in the hall, the small square jade seal was revealed. Light glimmered off its one gilded corner. Yuan Shu's full attention was drawn to it. He forgot Zhou Yu's existence entirely; hunger shone in his eyes, as if he were already unwilling to part with the seal for even a second.

"Zhugong," Yang Hong said quietly. "This must be what Sun Jian picked up… It is, without a doubt, the imperial jade seal."

This seal symbolized the power of the emperor over the vast land and its many inhabitants. It was no wonder Yuan Shu fell into a dreamlike trance in its presence. Yang Hong lifted the light higher, and under the glow of the lamp, Yuan Shu's gentlemanly airs disappeared without a trace.

He could only mumble, again and again. "Incredible, incredible…"

"Zhugong," Zhou Yu said sincerely. "To lower that bastard Sun Ce's guard, Yu lied to gain his trust, so he would store the jade seal in the pool of the side courtyard. Today, early in the morning, Yu managed to successfully retrieve it."

"Wow, wow!" Yuan Shu snapped back to himself.

Yang Hong waved his hand slightly. "Zhugong!"

Using the yellow cloth, Yang Hong rewrapped the jade seal, and only then could Yuan Shu pull his attention away. He watched Yang Hong carry the jade seal into the backyard before letting out a long breath and nodding at Zhou Yu.

"You've done well," Yuan Shu said. "I was mistaken about you, Zhou Yu."

Zhou Yu spoke, voice choked, "Yu did nothing. This object circulated for many years and is finally resting in Zhugong's hands, which means that Zhugong…has received the mandate of the heavens. It is therefore his duty to ensure his people live long lives and the nation prospers. For Yu to have helped fulfill this is no more than a fated coincidence. Yu is ready to die even the cruelest death to repay the favor Zhugong showed in giving him a

space to call his own… Yu does not know how to repay Zhugong's appreciation…"

Zhou Yu's speech sputtered out, and he stared into his wine cup, finding himself unable to continue. Yuan Shu laughed loudly, joyfully, and he moved forward to hug Zhou Yu. Zhou Yu hurried to rise and raise him to his feet, and the two of them, one old and one young, embraced like friends that spanned generations.

Yuan Shu said, "Nephew, there are some things this old man cannot say, but it doesn't matter, because you and I both know what I mean to say in our hearts."

Zhou Yu nodded. In this moment, Yuan Shu was as pleased as he had ever been. No matter what Zhou Yu requested, Yuan Shu would grant it, and all he had to do was open his mouth and ask. But his facade already carried him this far; the most important matter he would need to wait to bring up at the right time.

Yuan Shu continued, "You must not mention this to outsiders."

Zhou Yu nodded; it was a reasonable request. "For now, the heavy snow sealed off access, and the pond is frozen over. Sun Ce shouldn't be able to inspect the bottom of the pool, but the mind is often restless during long, sleepless nights…"

"You are correct," Yuan Shu said with a cold chuckle and a wave of his hand. "Since the item has been found, in my opinion…"

"Zhugong." Yang Hong returned from the inner room and sat down. He cupped his hands. "Zhugong, Zhou-daren, please listen."

Zhou Yu nodded. Yuan Shu was in a good mood and stroked his beard. "Speak."

Yang Hong's eyes narrowed, and he studied Zhou Yu before he smiled. "I did not expect Zhou-daren would possess such a meticulous mind. I let judgments cloud my vision. The Sun family must be dealt with, but Zhugong must not rush to do it at this time. I imagine Zhou-daren also thought of a plan, so why not let us hear it?"

Zhou Yu smiled briefly. He knew Yang Hong was clever. He would not get personally involved, yet he would borrow someone else's hand to

kill Sun Ce.

After thinking deeply, Zhou Yu opened his mouth. “To tell Zhugong the truth, Yu has indeed thought of this before. Sun Jian is still holding his troops in front of Hulao Pass. Killing his eldest son now may bring about a change.”

“Hmm,” Yuan Shu said. “Tell me more.”

“Sun Ce’s arrival and the relationship between this lowly one and the Sun family are more than enough to serve as a breakthrough for this stalemate.”

His plan would be foolproof. Yuan Shu would not doubt his integrity—handing over the imperial seal had earned the man’s trust.

“Why not temporarily reassure Sun Ce? After all, the jade seal returning to its rightful master can’t be discovered by that bastard until spring comes and the ice melts.”

Zhou Yu had chosen the phrase “returning to its rightful master” to appeal to Yuan Shu, who began chuckling again.

“Zhugong, after the Shangyuan Festival, why not pretend to have resolved this quarrel amicably and let this lowly one go with Sun Ce? Then, send a group of assassins disguised as soldiers to escort the three members of the Sun family. When that time comes, this modest one will come up with a plan to trick Sun Jian onto the carriage with a letter from Sun Ce. Sun Jian, arrogantly believing he succeeded, will think his wife and sons have left Shouchun. Then there will be nothing hindering Zhugong’s progress, and Zhugong can take the opportunity to act.

“Once Sun Jian is dealt with, Sun Ce can be slaughtered as well. That will prevent any future issues,” Zhou Yu concluded.

“A masterful plan!” Yuan Shu exclaimed.

He looked toward Yang Hong, who chuckled dryly but didn’t reply. Yuan Shu spoke to Zhou Yu. “Go forth to reassure Sun Ce. As for everything else, Yang Hong will assist you.”

Yang Hong, however, seemed to harbor suspicions. “With Sun Jian’s talent, I’m afraid he may not fall for it easily.”

“When this junior saves his wife and sons and arrives at his encampment, Sun Jian will be moved,” Zhou Yu asserted, “and he will arrange for a lavish banquet to award me appropriately. At that time, unless circumstances demand otherwise, slipping in some poison and eliminating all of them in one fell swoop will do.”

“Ah,” Yang Hong said, as if he had formulated the same idea. “If that is the case, you must not let Sun Ce catch even the slightest wind of this.”

“We absolutely mustn’t.”

“Madame Sun and Sun Quan can be released,” Yang Hong said. “But as for Sun Ce… Zhugong, you must not release Sun Ce.”

Zhou Yu’s heart hammered in his chest.

“If we let Sun Ce go, there would be no end of troubles in the future,” Yang Hong said. “Even if we successfully remove Sun Jian, letting Sun Ce live is basically the same as releasing a tiger to return to the mountain. With how I see it, Sun Ce already fully trusts Zhou-daren. Why not take the opportunity to take the Lady of Wu and Sun Quan out of the city to Sun Jian’s camp? As for Sun Ce, we will continue to keep him here.”

Zhou Yu replied, worried, “I’m afraid I may not be able to persuade Sun Ce to stay.”

“It’s all right,” Yang Hong reassured him. “When he hears his mother and younger brother escaped, how can he not thank you? We just need him to stay in Shouchun for a few more days.”

“Hmm,” Yuan Shu mused aloud. “You are right. This way, even if nephew Zhou is unable to get rid of Sun Ce, at least Sun Ce will remain in our hands. Even if Sun Jian manages to capture you instead, it will be easy for us to exchange hostages. He can choose not to care about his wife, but that old man cannot choose not to care about your life, nephew Zhou!”

Yang Hong’s scheme was purposefully cruel. He obviously still didn’t fully trust Zhou Yu, who couldn’t help but break out in a cold sweat. As soon as he arrived in Sun Jian’s camp and carried out Yuan Shu’s plan, they would kill Sun Ce here in Shouchun to ensure any future obstacles were removed entirely.

“A magnificent scheme from Lord Yang,” Zhou Yu could only say. “Then all that is required are three waist tallies that allow exit from the city and a set of travel documents.”

“Yes. As for the specific details,” Yang Hong said, “let me think it through once more. We shall try to resolve this in one go.”

Zhou Yu released a breath, acting as though he had set down a heavy burden that had been weighing on his mind. In Yang Hong and Yuan Shu’s eyes, however, Zhou Yu appeared to be a cowardly thief, afraid Sun Ce would find out he stole the jade seal. If he could overthrow the Sun family soon, removing that suspicion would be easy.

Zhou Yu knew Yuan Shu wanted to admire his jade seal more, so he rose and took his leave. Yang Hong and Yuan Shu stayed in the hall.

“Bring it out, bring it out,” Yuan Shu said. “Quickly, bring it over for Zhugong to look at. Does Benchu know of this?”

“I don’t know,” Yang Hong said quietly. “When Zhou Yu came, he was clearly hiding it from his eyes and ears…”

Yang Hong brought the jade seal out again. Yuan Shu unfolded the yellow cloth as if he were a madman, just to blankly stare at the contents within. Yang Hong continued quietly, “Zhugong, Zhou Yu has the heart of a jackal. Look at how he even plotted to murder Sun Ce, whom he’s known since he was young… If such a person remains at Zhugong’s side…”

“I get it, I get it,” Yuan Shu said. “After the Sun family is dealt with, do as you see fit.”

Upon hearing these words, Yang Hong also let out a breath in relief.

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That same day, Sun Ce’s observers were all removed, leaving only the one outside the fence.

Sun Ce was in Zhou Yu’s room, teaching Sun Quan to write. As he drew out the strokes, he said quietly, “He still doesn’t trust you.”

“What I’m more afraid of is something changing…” Zhou Yu replied.

“Rest assured,” Sun Ce said. “Yuan Shu doesn’t hold many skilled warriors under his command, so he won’t be able to stop me.” His attention turned back to Sun Quan with a frown. “Focus a little more.”

Sun Quan was clearly a little afraid of Sun Ce. His elder brother was like a father to him; since Sun Jian was usually away at war, most of the time Sun Ce taught him. Not only how to read, but also how to write, and every time Zhou Yu ran into Sun Quan when he spotted Sun Ce, Sun Quan acted like a mouse that saw a cat.

Zhou Yu couldn’t resist interrupting. “Don’t be so hard on him; he’s just a child.”

Sun Ce chuckled. “Are you his sister-in-law, being so protective of him?”

It took a moment for Zhou Yu to understand his meaning, but as soon as he did, he spat the tea out of his mouth. He stood, ready to teach Sun Ce a lesson, but Sun Ce tossed his brush away and dodged him, shouting from the doorway, “I’m stopping! Sun Quan, remember this! One day, when Gongjin isn’t there to shield you, get ready for a beating!”

Sun Quan was gleeful at having been granted freedom, and he said, “I don’t want you as my brother anymore. I want Zhou-dage!”

“Sun Quan!” a child called rudely from the doorway.

Having nearly run him over, Sun Ce glanced down.

Zhou Yu spoke up. “Cao Pi, come in. How many days have you gone without studying?”

“Zhao-dage was with me,” Cao Pi said unhappily, taking off his boots and coming inside. Under the eaves, Sun Ce placed the two children’s boots together neatly, fascinated by the pair of boys. Cao Cao’s son possessed a delicate appearance, and Sun Quan was young and fresh, so the two children together looked as elegant and beautiful as statues meticulously carved from fine jade. Even more incredibly, they seemed untouched by the world’s worries.

“Where’s Zhao Zilong?” Sun Ce asked.

“He went to find the allied troops.” Cao Pi shot Sun Ce a nasty glare before he turned to Sun Quan. “This is your brother?”

“Mm-hmm,” Sun Quan replied.

“You got scolded by Zhao Zilong?” Zhou Yu examined Cao Pi’s expression. Clearly, Zhao Yun had rebuked him soundly.

Cao Pi didn’t respond, instead asking, “Zhou-dage, at the end of the year Zhen-jie’s setting out a banquet and inviting you and Zhao-dage to drink. Will you go? You too, hey.”

Cao Pi nudged Sun Quan’s arm, and Sun Quan’s brush jerked over the paper. He yelped.

Zhen Mi was beautiful. She probably worried Cao Pi would be bored, so she decided to keep him company on New Year’s. But it wouldn’t be very interesting with just the two of them, so Cao Pi was inviting Zhao Zilong, and he also wanted to drag Zhou Yu and Sun Quan along to liven things up.

Zhou Yu thought deeply, not responding, while Sun Ce took a seat on the windowsill.

“Don’t even think about it!” he remarked frivolously. “Zhou Gongjing’s going to come drink and eat with me and my mother this New Year’s. But we can spare Sun Quan.”

“I won’t go!” Sun Quan said. “I’ll spend it with Mom!”

“How about this?” Zhou Yu said to Cao Pi. “If Yuan-daren is interested, let’s have the two families gather together and lay out a feast in the side courtyard. There’s no need to separate the men and the women either; we can all sit together and eat. How about you go back and ask if that’s possible?”

Cao Pi was still a little kid, so he preferred an energetic gathering, and he thought for a bit. “Let me go back and ask.”

Zhen Mi was Yuan Shao’s son’s wife, and they’d been married for quite a while. It was not proper for her to sit with them and eat as a married woman, but since they were guests, they didn’t have to uphold these formalities. Spending the new year together was one thing, while rejection would have its own reasons.

Cao Pi went back and asked, but Zhen Mi tactfully declined, which was within Zhou Yu’s expectations.

Zhou Yu instead arranged with Cao Pi to browse the lantern markets during the Shangyuan Festival together, to which Cao Pi begrudgingly agreed.

***

In no time at all, the end of the year was upon them. On the twenty-eighth night of the last month, Yang Hong sent for Zhou Yu and handed him three tallies that would allow him through the sentry posts, as well as travel documents. After the two made their arrangements, he handed the poison to Zhou Yu as they prepared for any last-minute changes.

“This poison has no color or taste,” Yang Hong said. “It is a rare object I’ve had stashed away for many years. A bit the size of a fingernail will poison over a hundred people. First the eyes lose sight, and after just the span of one stick of incense, the seven orifices will bleed,[26] and the person will die.”

Zhou Yu listened silently, nodding from time to time.

Yang Hong continued, “I’ve already changed out the guard rotation for the Records Office. They’re all now assassins with great skill. When the time comes, pretend you stole the waist tallies from me, and in the depths of the night of the Shangyuan Festival, guide the two members of the Sun family out of the city. After you leave the city, you must not stop. Head directly for Sun Jian’s main camp. As for the rest, that is up to you.”

“On the night of the Shangyuan Festival, I must make other arrangements to gain Sun Ce’s trust,” Zhou Yu replied. “As best you can, do not send anyone to follow us. Sun Ce will return to the estate, so you only need to have an ambush set up outside the room.”

“All right.” Yang Hong nodded meaningfully.

With Yang Hong’s meticulous mind, he definitely had reservations, so Zhou Yu continued, “Let the sentries count the number of people coming along. If it isn’t three, then they cannot let them out of the city. This way, Yang-daren has no need to send anyone to watch either.”

“When the time comes, I’ll send someone,” Yang Hong said. “He’ll wait outside the city gates to search your carriage.”

“All right,” Zhou Yu said, nodding.

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A light snow began to fall on New Year’s Eve. Sun Ce and Zhou Yu passed through the long corridor, heading toward the main hall to greet Yuan Shu. That afternoon, Yuan Shu gifted them wine, and upon seeing Zhou Yu and Sun Ce standing together speaking intimately, he came and drank a cup with them. At twilight, the banquet dispersed, and Yuan Shu went on his own to offer up wine to the heavens, while Sun Ce and Zhou Yu headed for the side courtyard to eat their New Year’s dinner.

“I’ve already got the tallies,” Zhou Yu said.

“How about we leave early?” Sun Ce said. “There’s no need to wait for the Shangyuan Festival.”

“No,” Zhou Yu said. “Yang Hong will definitely let me go, but I’m guessing he has a contingency in place. There’s no rush to leave. Plus, I promised Cao Pi that no matter what, I’d take him out of the city. As for you, you’ll have to figure out a way to escape on your own.

“Here are three waist tallies,” Zhou Yu continued, after returning to his room. “One is for you, one is for Zhao Zilong, and the last one I’ll keep, to prevent any sudden changes.”

“Yang Hong assigned twenty people to you. They may not be easy to defeat,” Sun Ce warned.

“They are probably his contingency plan, but there’s no need to worry,” Zhou Yu responded. “Our plan must stay flexible, because the situation could change in an instant.”

***

That night Sun Ce, Sun Quan, and the Lady of Wu, as well as Zhou Yu, were drinking wine in their hall. They chatted about the past. The Lady of Wu was fond of Zhou Yu and mentioned again that in the coming year, she would definitely go visit Shu County and spend some time with Madame Zhou.

Snow swept through the sky, and every household was filled with the cloying, warm fragrance of wintersweet. Zhou Yu thought of his mother, spending the new year home alone, and he couldn't resist the wave of sorrow that filled his heart.

"I've heard the name of that friend of yours, Lu Zijing, often," the Lady of Wu said, smiling, noticing Zhou Yu was likely thinking of home. "I imagine your mother's spending the new year with the Lu family."

"That's right, yes, that's right," Zhou Yu said to the gathered group, immediately coming back to himself. "More likely than not, Zijing is taking my place to offer up sacrifices to my ancestors, and he probably also brought my mother back home with him."

"When we go back this time, let's not go home," Sun Ce smiled, his face red from drinking. "Why don't we first head to Gongjin's house to be guests and take advantage of his goodwill?"

"You monkey," the Lady of Wu chided.

Zhou Yu's heart jolted, and he glanced at Sun Ce.

Sun Ce continued, "Shu County's not far either. Have Dad send some men over, and the two families can live together. It'll be livelier."

Sun Ce had made the suggestion because he was afraid Zhou Yu would offend Yuan Shu and his family members would become the target of revenge.

Zhou Yu hurried to say, "If Auntie is willing to come and be our guest, Yu would be glad to welcome you."

The Lady of Wu had inferred the general gist of her son's words as well, and she smiled. "Let's speak of it later. If you have time and can escort your mother over to us, it would be good for us to have a chance to chat."

Zhou Yu nodded. That night, after the Lady of Wu retired into her inner rooms, Sun Quan went to find Cao Pi to play with after dinner. Sun Ce and Zhou Yu filled their cups again and again, toasting each other, drinking until they were drunk—and then some—before they stumbled, leaning against each other, to their rooms.

***

That night, the entirety of the Yuan estate was rowdy. Zhou Yu and Sun Ce sat shoulder to shoulder on the bed, soaking their feet in the same tub.

Sun Ce leaned on Zhou Yu, speaking lazily. “Today, I sent Fei Yu out to tell my dad to send some troops to us on the northern side of Wanling.”

“The journey will be cold with these snowy days,” Zhou Yu said. “I am grateful for those soldiers’ efforts.”

“My uncle is in Wanling,” Sun Ce said. “As soon as we arrive in Danyang, we will be safe.”

Sun Ce’s maternal uncle, Wu Jing, was the governor of Liyang. As long as they could flee Shouchun, it didn’t matter what happened next. Sun Ce leaned on him for a while longer before rising and bringing over a cloth towel, wiping Zhou Yu’s feet dry for him.

Zhou Yu pondered for a moment. “You do not need to worry about my mother being intimidated into following orders.”

“It’s always good to be more prepared than not,” Sun Ce replied.

“The matter of Yuan Shu obtaining the jade seal and detaining your mother and Sun Quan cannot be made public, so as long as we escape, he will silently accept his defeat. No one will dare to tell.”

“He doesn’t dare touch me, but I’m afraid he’ll go after you. You don’t need to go anywhere else this time. Just follow me. I’ll bring your mother along too, and we’ll stay in Danyang. Our two families will live together. After I find some firm footing, then I’ll give you the post that you deserve.”

Zhou Yu didn’t say anything. He merely listened.

Sun Ce had drunk a little too much, and his head hurt, so he smiled and continued, “Let’s sleep, let’s sleep. Tomorrow is the first day of the new year. I’ll give you a posting on the new year.”

Zhou Yu chuckled. That reminded him of the New Year’s celebrations during their childhood, when he had brought Sun Ce along to his relatives’ families to ask for money to buy candy with.

“How old am I now, for you to give me an envelope for the new year?” he asked, amused. “Are you waiting for me to go buy some candy so you can have some?”

***

That was the night Zhou Yu slept most soundly. He knew they were going to leave Shouchun soon, and he could finally release the heavy burden weighing on him. By the time he woke the next morning, Sun Ce was deep into his staff technique practice routine in the yard. Filled to the brim with energy, Zhou Yu packed away his bedding, only to find an actual envelope under his pillow.

Zhou Yu couldn’t resist chuckling. The envelope was pretty hefty. He figured it was silver taels, but when he opened it, he froze in shock.

Instead of money, in his hand sat a wooden waist tally cut from golden-veined nanmu wood, carved with the line of words: *The Jianwei General of the Household, Zhou.*

When he flipped it over, the back showed Sun Jian’s carven seal as prefect of Changsha, as well as Sun Ce’s seal as general.

The door to the room opened, and Zhou Yu, sword and human as one, shot out with an accompanying gust of wind. Sun Ce’s arms and torso were bare as he practiced his staff techniques, and shouted “Good!” as the two of them began to spar in the courtyard.

With a sweep of his foot, Zhou Yu sent the snow on the ground flying into the air, flurries of snow and plum blossoms mixing in the sky. His sword style relied on hard strength and his moves were majestic, while Sun

Ce’s staff techniques were like a fierce, raging wave. One staff became ten, ten became a hundred, and the sky filled with afterimages of staves, sweeping forward like the raging sea, then standing firm like the bulk of Mount Tai.

Zhou Yu’s expression did not change. The Chijun Sword spun through the air, and no matter how Sun Ce tried to beat him down, his sword was like a lone boat made of a single leaf floating in a vengeful ocean, floating untouched from shore to shore.

“Good!” Zhao Yun’s voice called from one side.

Seeing that Zhao Yun intended to enter, Zhou Yu sheathed his sword and backed away, while Zhao Yun twirled his spear and leaped forward, his spear clashing with Sun Ce’s staff. At times it was like a falcon capturing a rabbit, and at others like a butterfly weaving through flowers; the two leaped into the air, carrying a flurry of plum blossoms along with them.

The display completely dazzled Cao Pi. Both used polearms, and with every action, the staff and spear darted out and drew back in grand whirling gestures, extremely handsomely. Sun Ce shouted, exerting all his effort, and the hail of afterimages of his staff forced Zhao Yun into a corner. Trapped, Zhao Yun could not fend him off any longer, and as his spear gave off a clear whistle, it shot out against that tide!

With a clang, the staff and spear collided. Sun Ce flipped and leaped away, and the two of them stopped.

Sun Ce was dripping with sweat, his chest heavy with breath. He had practiced alone for almost half an hour before sparring with Zhou Yu and then Zhao Yun. Now he was absolutely exhausted.

“Good moves,” Zhao Yun said, smiling. “Maybe Zilong’s interference was not necessary that day.”

“How could that be?” Zhou Yu responded. “If it wasn’t for General Zhao coming to the rescue, we two would have fallen to Lü Bu.”

Zhao Yun smiled, but he didn’t say anything. When he and Sun Ce crossed weapons, Zhou Yu noticed his hands were still steady, and he wasn’t even short of breath; it was clear his martial prowess was well above theirs. He had done nothing more than test their skills just now.

Sun Ce went inside to change.

Zhao Yun asked Zhou Yu, “Where did Xiandi learn these sword techniques? May I take a look at that sword?”

Zhou Yu handed the sword over to him with both hands. Though he and Lü Bu inspected the sword similarly, Zhao Yun was clearly more humble than the swaggering Lü Bu, so Zhou Yu explained to him, “What I used just now was not a sword style of the Central Plains, but rather the Sixteen Techniques of the Vast Sea. I learned it from an overseas master four years ago.”

Zhao Yun nodded, studying the Chijun Sword.

“The style Xiandi uses is focused entirely on the element of water. It possesses the power of rivers and seas and the might of thousands of crashing waves. Very impressive, indeed. Zilong did not ask for a chance himself, instead choosing to steal a peek at a few moves. I hope that Xiandi will not take this to heart.”

With Zhao Yun’s abilities, he naturally would not need to “steal” sword techniques. After a moment of pondering, Zhao Yun returned the long sword to Zhou Yu.

“My former master taught me a few sword techniques named Seeing the Dragon in the Fields. Would Xiandi be willing to exchange a few blows with Yu-xiong?”

Zhou Yu twitched; the offer of exchanging blows was a cover. Zhao Yun wanted to teach him a few techniques. Thus, Zhou Yu put all his effort into learning. After only five minutes, Zhao Yun taught Zhou Yu the three moves of Seeing the Dragon and also pointed out the elements comprising each of them.

“Seeing the Dragon in the Fields requires you to attain the recognition of the heavens. This technique requires the use of concealment, hiding, and secrecy as the main focus before finally ‘revealing.’”

“Yes,” Zhou Yu said earnestly. “I am endlessly grateful for Zhao-xiong’s pointers.”

Sun Ce brushed by him, already changed, and Zhao Yun entered the room, sitting down with Cao Pi.

“How are the matters General Zhao is dealing with?” Sun Ce asked, pleased.

Zhao Yun shook his head helplessly. It was clear that though he had come under Gongsun Zan’s orders, he hadn’t accomplished anything, and his belly was full of suppressed rage.

“However many men you need, count on me to provide them,” Sun Ce said easily. “What are Lord Gongsun’s plans afterward?”

Zhao Yun hurried to rise and thank Sun Ce. Meanwhile, Zhou Yu was at a loss for words. *You haven’t even taken care of yourself yet, and here you are busying yourself with the affairs of others? You’re not afraid of Zhao Yun laughing at you?*

But Zhao Yun was touched by this, and he replied earnestly, “Yu-xiong will remember Bofu-xiandi’s goodwill, but your honored father’s troops are still stationed at the foot of Hangu Pass. You must act for the greater good. If you and your father can keep Dong Zhuo under control, then you are serving all the lives in Hebei. If, because of a selfish wish of Zilong’s, I let Xiandi dispatch his troops and hence cause the Central Plains to lose their last defenses, how would I be able to rest easy?”

Sun Ce’s expression grew solemn. “Zhao-dage speaks truly. It was I who was too hasty in offering. Please, sit.”

Zhao Yun sighed. “Last night, I kept turning it about in my mind, again and again, and finally decided leaving now is for the best. Great General Yuan, however, seems to have other plans, and said that when the third month comes, Yuan Shao will send a letter to my liege, and we will commence with the plan at that time.”

Zhou Yu thought, *He isn’t planning on dragging Zhao Yun down as well, right?* Though he did not know what Yuan Shao planned for Hebei, the truth was that Ji Province[27] was his territory… At that, as if sharing a thought, Zhou Yu and Sun Ce exchanged a glance.

“During these next few days,” Zhao Yun said, “I will find a way to leave first.”

“Should Yuan Shao pursue you to capture, the journey from here back to the western part of Liaoning is thousands of miles,” Cao Pi remarked unhappily. “How will you be able to escape?”

“Even if I cannot escape, I must go,” Zhao Yun said. “I cannot drag it out any longer. If my stay continues, the situation may change. My purpose in coming here today was to bid farewell to Sun-xiongdi and Zhou-xiongdi.”

Zhou Yu held up his hands to indicate the two of them should wait for a moment, and he pulled out a tally, placing it on the table.

“I’ve thought it through,” Zhou Yu said. “The night of the Shangyuan Festival, we’ll leave together. We’ll split up into three, and I will lead Yuan Shu’s troops away so you all can escape.”

Zhao Yun’s gaze fell onto the tally that gave its bearer the right of passage out of the city, before leveling on Zhou Yu, then Sun Ce.

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Half a month later, the Shangyuan Festival in Shouchun started.

Everything was fresh and new so early in the new year. A bright moon hung in the sky, and the first night of the spring markets bustled with activity. The flower lanterns formed an ocean, and together with the fireworks, they lit up the night with silver flowers and flaming trees.

“Let’s go!” Sun Ce called, rushing around excitedly. “Let’s go wander the lantern markets!”

Thinking about their plans to escape certain doom this very night tied Zhou Yu’s stomach in knots. Yet Sun Ce seemed completely unaffected. Zhou Yu wanted to throttle him.

“I’m not going anymore,” Zhou Yu said. “You take Sun Quan to walk around for a bit. Come back soon.”

“What are you afraid of?” Sun Ce asked. “Zilong will be following us tonight. Are you worried something will happen that we can’t deal with? If one comes, we’ll kill one; if two come, we’ll kill a pair. Let’s go.”

Zhou Yu had no response, so he could only rise and follow Sun Ce out.

When they passed through the corridor, they saw Yuan Shao, Yuan Shu, Zhen Mi, Yang Hong, and the rest heading toward them. They were going to the garden to admire the lights, and the two sides exchanged a few distant pleasantries. Yuan Shu chuckled, telling Zhou Yu and Sun Ce to freely enjoy themselves. Yang Hong shot him a secret glance, and Zhou Yu nodded almost imperceptibly; everything was arranged as he ordered.

They left the general's residence behind. This was the first time Sun Ce was able to stroll through the streets after arriving in Shouchun, and he linked hands with Zhou Yu, the two leading Sun Quan through the market. Zhou Yu had previously arranged for the men Yuan Shu gave him to wait for him outside the city. Earlier, Zhao Yun had taken Cao Pi out wandering, and Zhou Yu didn't know where they were.

Sun Quan did not know about their plan, and he smiled as he asked where Cao Pi had run off to. In the market, Zhou Yu bought him a pinwheel that kept whirling, while he and Sun Ce took turns carrying him piggyback to prevent being separated by the crowd. That night, the market was filled with young couples, men and women decked out in bright robes, and when they saw Zhou Yu and Sun Ce carrying a young child who looked carved from jade, none of them could resist letting their gazes linger on them a little longer. Their ensemble was pretty amusing.

"I want to eat that," Sun Quan said. "What's that?"

"Stop eating so much," Sun Ce said. "You won't be able to run around soon."

"Let me eat!" Sun Quan demanded.

"What did Cao Cao's son teach you…" Sun Ce's amusement didn't mask his exasperation. "You even dare to talk back now?"

"Buy some for him, please, buy some for him," Zhou Yu pleaded.

Zhou Yu was terrified of young children crying or fighting, because the situation could completely devolve in moments. He was afraid that Sun Quan would turn upset, and if he began to fuss right in the middle of the market, it could be devastating. Sun Ce had no choice when it came to Zhou Yu, so he pulled out some money and handed it over.

"Go, go quickly," Sun Ce said.

Zhou Yu bought two sticky rice cakes, handing one to Sun Quan while starting to eat the other. The rice cake was pleasantly warm, formed from glutinous rice sprinkled with crushed peanuts.

“Why don’t I get one?” Sun Ce asked.

“Didn’t you say you weren’t going to eat?” Sun Quan responded.

“That’s right,” Zhou Yu teased. “Didn’t you say you weren’t going to eat?”

To prevent Sun Ce exploding from anger, Zhou Yu, chuckling, handed over his own half-eaten rice cake. Sun Ce swallowed it down while Sun Quan squeezed into the mass of people, calling, “Cao Pi! Cao Pi!”

The other boy was riding on Zhao Yun’s shoulders, the two of them standing before the stage, watching a wooden puppet play. Sun Quan clambered over Sun Ce, and so he quickly lifted his brother onto his shoulders as they squeezed through the crowd.

When Zhao Yun sent Zhou Yu a glance, Zhou Yu nodded slightly. Everything was ready.

“Are all your belongings packed?” Zhou Yu asked.

“We’re not bringing anything,” Zhao Yun said quietly. “Madame Yuan prepared some travel expenses for Cao Pi.”

On stage, the wooden puppets were performing “The Legend of the Seven Magpies,” which told the story of a forbidden romance between a cowherd and a weaver. Cao Pi watched fixedly, his eyes a little red.

Zhou Yu teased him, “You haven’t really fallen in love with a great beauty, have you?”

“Nonsense,” Cao Pi said. “When I return in a few years, I’ll find her, to be my wife.”

Zhao Yun couldn’t stop laughing, almost sending Cao Pi tumbling down from his shoulders. The three of them watched the play for a while before Sun Quan realized Cao Pi seemed hurt, and he grabbed his hand.

“Have you…told Zhen-jie?”

“Yup,” Cao Pi replied. “I said I would come back.”

***

The puppet act finished, and the crowd watching dissipated. The five moved to sit shoulder to shoulder by the river, watching the colorful lights on the other bank. The lanterns winked in and out like a scene from a dream, to the point of seeming unreal. As they watched, Sun Ce hugged one knee, his foot placed on the rocks by the water. To Zhou Yu, this revealed the man's trepidation—he was afraid of something going wrong.

When the lights of the lanterns faded away and the market was cleaned up, Zhao Yun took the two little children to buy some fried snacks. After that, Zhou Yu said, from his position at the entrance to the market, "Let's go."

"I haven't said goodbye to Zhen-jie yet," Cao Pi said.

"You can't go back," Zhou Yu replied, frowning. "There will be more chances in the future for you two to see each other."

Cao Pi considered Zhou Yu's words. Though he was reluctant, he could not afford to slow everyone down at this point, so he could only go along.

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The carriage came to a stop at the mouth of the alley, and Sun Ce climbed in. Madame Sun was sitting in the carriage, but to their surprise, Zhen Mi was also there. She greeted the group before climbing down to talk with Cao Pi in the alley.

Cao Pi's eyes reddened, and after talking with her for a while, he took Zhen Mi's hand in his. She wiped the tears from his eyes before pulling out a tortoiseshell-patterned ring and giving it to Cao Pi.

"Everyone," Zhen Mi said gently, "we shall meet again someday."

"Madame Yuan, take good care of yourself," Zhao Yun said, cupping his hands.

As Zhen Mi left, the rest of them climbed into the carriage. Cao Pi was still dazed, so Zhao Yun reassured him, “You will see each other again in the future.”

Sun Ce smirked. “She’s already married. Are you really set on her?”

Cao Pi glared at him.

His promise to Zhen Mi had eased some of Zhou Yu’s anxiety, even going so far as to tickle him into amusement. The group laughed for a bit before the Lady of Wu wiped the two children’s hands clean. When they passed the backyard of the general’s estate, Zhao Yun led a horse out, escorting the group toward the exit of the city.

The gates to Shouchun would remain open until midnight as a result of the Shangyuan lantern markets. Sun Ce brought them to the city gates, where he bade farewell to Sun Quan and his mother before turning and heading back.

Zhou Yu’s heart did not stop pounding. When he handed over his waist tally, the officer glanced at the carriage’s occupants a few times. Clearly, he’d already received the news Zhou Yu was leaving the city that night, and how their party would be three people in total, with one elder and one child. All their identities matched. A man from under the general’s estate standing next to the officer also checked the entire carriage to make sure no one else was hidden within.

Zhou Yu recognized the civil officer as one of Yang Hong’s subordinates. However, technically, he shouldn’t know how many waist tallies Zhou Yu held. The official finished his check, and as he was about to let them go, the city guard stopped him.

“The three of you,” the officer of the city guard pointed out, “only have one waist tally between you. What’s going on here?”

“How should I know?” Zhou Yu exclaimed. “Why don’t you send someone to ask Yang-daren?! The citizens in the city have all left, yet you won’t let us on official business leave?! This is my decree as an Officer of the Records, and if you dare delay me, you can’t blame me for being impolite!” Zhou Yu looked toward the civil official. “Isn’t that right?”

The civil official wasn’t sure what to do. Many people wanted to leave the city tonight, most of whom had traveled from the regions

surrounding Shouchun to celebrate the Shangyuan Festival. Right now the rush of the crowd was like the tide, and Zhou Yu's horse carriage blocked the city gates, clogging up the opening everyone was funneling out of. The city guard was only aware there would be some people from the general's estate leaving the city tonight. Not even the subordinate Yang Hong sent could clarify the matter, and so he could only let them through to prevent them from holding things up—he didn't wish to be punished.

After all, they expected three people, and that was what they found. He couldn't be bothered caring about the rest.

Zhou Yu climbed onto the driver's seat, and with a lash of his long whip, the carriage finally exited the city. When he turned back to look, the number of citizens near the gate was growing, and he could no longer find Zhao Yun.

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Zhao Yun lead the horse with one hand, the other leading Cao Pi.

"Stop," the officer said. "Identify yourself. I haven't seen you before."

Cao Pi pulled out the waist tally. "This is from the general's estate, see?"

The officer cast them a dubious look.

With the practiced accent of a Hebei officer, Zhao Yun barked arrogantly, "This individual is the nephew of Lord Yuan Benchu, and after celebrating the Shangyuan Festival, he is heading back to Ji Province. What squad are you from? What is your title? What insolence!"

Zhao Yun stood at the city gates, handsome and imposing, like a tree grown from jade. The bright clothing he wore, a set of luxurious martial robes complete with a bodyguard's sword belted at his side, hung naturally, as if he'd been born in them. Cao Pi, on the other hand, with his thick brows and large eyes, was emanating a scholar's aura. On his finger, he wore the tortoiseshell ring Zhen Mi gave him, and he flaunted it to the city guard.

"Do you recognize this?" Cao Pi asked.

The city guard stepped aside and let the two of them pass.

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“Quickly.”

Zhou Yu and his group met up with Cao Pi and Zhao Yun. Zhao Yun lifted Cao Pi into the horse carriage, while he swiftly changed his clothing, donning the guise of a cart driver. He took Zhou Yu’s spot on the driver’s seat, while Zhou Yu mounted Zhao Yun’s horse.

“Where are your attendants?” Zhao Yun asked.

“I arranged for them to be at the inn,” Zhou Yu said. “We’ll travel under the cover of darkness tonight, and tomorrow night when we arrive at our lodgings, you’ll take Cao Pi and make your way first. Leave the rest of them to me.”

“How many men are there?” Zhao Yun asked.

Zhou Yu gestured that there were about twenty.

“You, me, and Bofu are more than enough to deal with twenty men,” Zhao Yun boasted.

“We cannot act recklessly,” Zhou Yu replied. “Madame Sun and the two children are here, and they might fall into enemy hands.”

A quiet discussion between them followed as they watched the city gates in the distance.

Zhao Yun said, “Bofu told me to pass this message on to you: ‘If I do not appear in the time it takes to steep a pot of tea, leave.’”

“Let’s wait a little longer,” Zhou Yu said earnestly. “It takes quite a bit of time to return to the estate, change, and leave the city gates.”

To avoid rousing Yuan Shu’s suspicion, Sun Ce and Zhou Yu agreed beforehand that after the lantern markets of the Shangyuan Festival concluded, Sun Ce would return to the general’s estate. Then, he would figure out a way to escape. But this was very dangerous—if Shouchun shut the city gates, then Sun Ce would be locked within.

At the same time, if the soldiers who swore their lives to this cause did not see Zhou Yu appear in the inn on the outskirts of the city, they would grow suspicious. As soon as they reported back to Yuan Shu, their entire group would be in danger.

Upon seeing the citizens cleared away, the guards of Shouchun slowly closed the city gates. With a rumble, they began to separate the lamplight inside from the darkness outside.

“Damn,” said Zhao Yun.

That word sent Zhou Yu into the depths of the abyss. He looked toward Zhao Yun to assure himself, who said, “Stay calm. Do not panic. If leaving the city was not an option, did you and Bofu agree on your next move?”

“If we leave him behind, we wait until tomorrow,” Zhou Yu said anxiously. “But Yuan Shu might be planning to kill him tonight…”

“Go first,” Zhao Yun said decisively. “Trust him. Jia!”

Zhou Yu turned back and focused once more on Shouchun. He sucked in a deep breath, praying silently that Sun Ce would catch up to them tomorrow.

Without knowing the outcome, Zhou Yu felt his heart sink in his chest. Just as Zhao Yun was about to get the carriage moving, Zhou Yu begged, “Wait a little longer—just fifteen minutes more.”

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Inside the city gates, Sun Ce wore his hood up, the waist tally held in his hand, riding his horse against the snowy winds as he rushed to the gates.

“I’m on important business for the Records Office of the general’s manor,” Sun Ce said, showing the tally. “Has Records Officer Zhou, Zhou-daren already left the city?!”

The city guard replied, “There was indeed an Officer of the Records who left the city.”

“Hurry and open the small gates,” Sun Ce demanded. “I have an urgent letter from General Yuan for the Officer of the Records!”

Sun Ce pulled out an envelope from the general’s manor and brandished it at the city guard. The city guard didn’t dare slow down official business, and he angled his torch to inspect it. It indeed appeared to be a letter originating from Yuan Shao’s manor. He immediately ordered his men to open the small gates.

“Brothers, you’ve worked hard; get a cup of light wine and warm yourselves up!” Sun Ce said, giving them a few broken silver pieces as a reward.

“We’ll keep the city gates open for you, Daren!” the city guard said happily. “Have a good trip! Officer of the Records Zhou can’t be very far!”

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Zhou Yu sat on his horse, the hand gripping the reins slick with sweat, only to see a small crack open on one of the side gates to Shouchun City. A sliver of light shone through, and a single steed charged out. Zhou Yu’s entire body was about to collapse with relief, while Zhao Yun merely smiled and waved his long whip once.

“Jia!”

“Jia!” Sun Ce’s voice traveled to them from afar. He caught up to the carriage procession, and they set off together in the dark night.

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The wheels rattled and hoofbeats thundered. It was nearing dawn by the time they arrived at the inn. Zhou Yu dismounted first to address the group of disguised assassins waiting in the inn.

“Everyone’s worked hard; let’s set off right now. We’ll rest tonight.”

The guards rose without speaking as they followed Zhou Yu, escorting the carriage on its way.

Sun Ce had already ducked into the carriage.

The Lady of Wu lifted aside the curtain. “Yu-er, who are these people?”

“My subordinates,” Zhou Yu replied truthfully. “Aunt, please rest assured—they are all members of the Records Office.”

The Lady of Wu nodded. She glanced at their followers, whose faces were plagued with murderous intent, veins bulging on the backs of their hands as they gripped them tightly with complete focus.

***

Every now and then the assassins would glance at Zhao Yun, clearly suspicious of the extra person, so Zhou Yu explained that he was just their carriage driver. By noon, their procession had already traveled almost a hundred miles, and Zhou Yu checked on the carriage several times.

Inside, Zhou Yu spoke quietly. “By now, Yuan Shu has definitely discovered you are no longer in the manor.”

“Not necessarily,” Sun Ce replied. “Last night, he and Yuan Shao drank themselves stupid. The later he wakes today, the more beneficial it is to us.”

“Was anyone keeping surveillance on you after you entered the manor?” Zhou Yu asked.

“Uh-uh,” Sun Ce replied. “Still, we should go faster. If Yuan Shu were to send men in pursuit, I’m worried we might not be able to move fast enough.”

“We can’t go any faster. If we look scared and rush, the assassins will grow suspicious. They’re experts, and there’s over twenty of them. Even if we can defeat them all, I’m not sure whether we can keep everyone safe.”

Zhou Yu glanced at Cao Pi, who tugged at his sleeve, face writ with suffering.

“What’s wrong?” Zhou Yu asked.

“I need to…relieve myself,” Cao Pi said.

Zhou Yu blinked.

“A little one or a big one?” Sun Ce asked.

“A little one,” Cao Pi said.

“Me too,” Sun Quan added.

Zhou Yu sucked in a deep breath. “Wait, let me think of something.”

The group of assassins were probably unaware two children traveled with them, and Zhou Yu couldn’t let them become aware of the fact. As he pondered, he figured it would be best for them to stay in the dark.

“You two, take turns getting out of the carriage to relieve yourselves. Swap your outfits as you do so.” Saying this, Zhou Yu exited the carriage, ordering the group to halt. “Madame Sun needs to rest for a bit; everyone go wait by the side of the road.”

Obeying Zhou Yu’s orders, the assembled party took up position by the roadside, and they waited where they stood since, thankfully, they didn’t dare to get too close to the carriage of the Lady of Wu. Zhao Yun stopped the carriage a little further away, helping the Lady of Wu down.

Cao Pi was wearing Sun Quan’s clothes as he stepped out as well, heading to the grass clumps by the roadside. A moment later, he trotted back to the carriage, and not long after, he tagged Sun Quan, who shot off.

Zhou Yu was putting his utmost effort into speaking with a group of the assassins, but most of them merely nodded, shook their heads, or, if forced, replied only shortly.

Zhou Yu thought, *This group of people might be very hard to deal with.*

“Sun Quan!” Zhou Yu shouted. “Don’t go too far.”

“Okay!” Sun Quan replied from within the tufts of grass.

A moment later, the Lady of Wu brought Sun Quan back to the carriage, and with Zhao Yun at the reins, the carriage set off again.

***

At noon, to gain some time, they ate some dried rations on the road. When twilight arrived, Zhao Yun stopped the carriage at a waystation, and the Lady of Wu led Sun Quan out of the carriage. Zhou Yu took his group to the inn to order food, eat, and pay. Since the waystation was small, the boss was also its waiter. Sensing a big business opportunity, he hurried back and forth, getting things ready.

“No need to trouble Zhou-daren,” a man who was clearly the leader of the assassins said. “We will eat dry rations.”

“You brothers have worked hard too,” Zhou Yu said to him quietly. “Even if you don’t eat, come sit inside for a bit. I’m afraid of Madame Sun growing suspicious. She’s already asked me several times about your group… If Sun Jian learns of this, he may distrust us.”

That leader thought for a bit, and after concluding Zhou Yu was right, he called over all his men and issued a few simple orders. The group flowed into the waystation, separated in an orderly manner, and began to eat rations on their own.

Zhou Yu took the water kettle over to the low platform and washed the cups for the Lady of Wu and Sun Quan. Ready to obey any orders, Zhao Yun stayed to one side.

“Go to the kitchen to take a look,” Zhou Yu said, “and tell them to cut two plates of cured meat and bring them out.”

Zhao Yun left. The assassins ate in the corner of the waystation, and Zhou Yu used his pointed gaze to alert the Lady of Wu as he poured the medicinal powder into the water kettle.

The Lady of Wu glanced back in understanding. Watching curiously, Sun Quan stood to one side, but he didn’t speak. The dishes were brought out, and Zhou Yu, the Lady of Wu, and the rest waited to eat, but when the waiter brought the cured meat to the other table, no one moved. One of the men rose to get water.

“Why not have some wine instead?” Zhou Yu asked.

He gestured for the waiter to bring some, at the same time lifting the kettle onto the counter. To do as he requested, the waiter went to the backyard, but that squad leader intervened.

“No need, we can just drink water.”

With that, the leader came over and picked up Zhou Yu’s kettle of water.

“We’ll have them boil some more for you,” Zhou Yu suggested.

Waving his hand in dismissal, the leader returned to his group to share the kettle around.

Zhou Yu ate quietly before telling Sun Quan, “Though this place cannot compare to the general’s manor, you must eat a little more, even if it doesn’t taste good. Otherwise, you won’t have strength.”

Sun Quan nodded. Zhao Yun, squatting under the eaves of the hallway as he dug into his food, didn’t turn his head.

Zhou Yu’s heart raced. He didn’t look back, so he didn’t know whether the assassins drank from that kettle or not.

A moment later, he heard the squad leader rise and say, “I’ll go boil some more water.”

Holding the kettle, he left for the backyard.

Zhao Yun was feeding hay to the carriage’s horses as the squad leader fetched water.

“Feed our horses too,” he said.

“Yes sir,” Zhao Yun said.

The leader put down the kettle and opened the back door. When he passed the carriage, a thought came to him, and he pulled aside the curtain, peeking within.

A sword flashed before his eyes, while from behind came a pitchfork. Sun Ce stabbed out from within the curtains, Zhao Yun from the rear, and the two of them struck down the leader where he stood!

Zhao Yun threw down the pitchfork, removed his outer robe, and tossed it into the carriage. As Sun Ce dragged the corpse out of sight, Zhao Yun turned and went inside. He sought out Zhou Yu and gestured, indicating they were exposed and needed to act.

Just as he did, the effects of the poison kicked in.

“Why did it go dark?”

“Did the lamps go out?”

“Poison!”

“Watch out!”

The assassins fell into chaos. Zhao Yun covered Sun Quan’s mouth, while Zhou Yu swept the food off the table. The two of them stood up, but as they moved, they disturbed the air, the slightest ripples of wind announcing their attempted escape.

An assassin roared angrily, “Don’t let them go! Attack!”

Zhou Yu turned, unsheathing his sword with a fluid movement. He held it steady, angled just so. The assassin rushed forward blindly, driving his chest directly onto the point of Zhou Yu’s blade.

Sun Ce shouted, “Everyone, get on the carriage first!”

“Masters! What are you doing?!” the waiter wailed.

Zhou Yu gripped the waiter’s collar, sending him outside with a single kick. There was pandemonium in the hall of the waystation; the blinded assassins had all drawn their swords and were attacking wildly. Sun Ce struck out with his staff, but his opponents could discern his swings by the sound of his weapon cutting through air and dodged his attacks.

To the others, Sun Ce yelled, “Leave first!”

Zhou Yu backed into the kitchen, and the two fought their opponents as they retreated. Sun Ce snatched some lit firewood from within the stove and tossed it through the air. Though the assassins dodged the projectiles, they could not escape their licking flames, and their clothes were instantly set ablaze. They shrieked as they patted themselves down in a frenzy, fumbling frantically.

Sun Ce and Zhou Yu ran out of the backyard, where Zhao Yun had already readied the carriage. As Zhou Yu untied the reins of the military steeds that the assassins had bound together, Sun Ce vaulted onto a horse.

With a wave of his long whip, Zhao Yun roared, “Go!”

The waiter rushed out from inside the waystation.

“These horses are compensation for your waystation!” Zhou Yu shouted at him. “Go quickly! Go to Danyang!”

“Take this!” Sun Ce handed the waiter a warrant, telling him to go find Sun Ce’s uncle, before he caught up to the rest of the group, the horse below him thundering away down the main road.

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The curtain of night fell, the entire sky filled with drifting snow. When Zhou Yu turned to look, he saw the waystation already going up in flames at the foot of the mountains. The waiter likely knew he couldn’t avoid what was coming, so he’d simply set the waystation on fire.

“I feel really sorry for him,” Zhou Yu said. “An unexpected disaster befell him, just like that.”

“Twenty horses is enough for him to start his business anew,” Sun Ce replied. “Although they are military horses, I imagine they’re unbranded because Yuan Shu used that group to silence people. Selling them won’t be difficult.”

“I’m worried Yuan Shu’s troops might already be in pursuit,” Zhao Yun said. “You two xiandi should rest first. We’ll have to rush ahead tonight.”

As they’d traveled, Zhou Yu’s heart dangled from a string. Their escape had been only one part skill and three parts luck. Now that his tension was finally released, he and Sun Ce climbed into the carriage, taking a brief moment to rest.

It was cramped inside, and squeezing so many people within forced Zhou Yu to hold Sun Quan while Sun Ce hugged Cao Pi. Halfway through the night, Zhou Yu woke only to find that Zhao Yun occupied Sun Ce’s spot, and Cao Pi was slumped in his embrace, sleeping soundly.

“Yu-er.” The Lady of Wu was still awake. “It’s all thanks to you this time. If you hadn’t saved our family…”

“Auntie,” Zhou Yu replied, smiling, “if it wasn’t for Bofu, I would have died on Mount Gu, in Lake Chao, or in Luoyang. I’d have left this

world in a variety of hellish nightmares, so please don’t say any more.” The Lady of Wu smiled. Zhou Yu continued, “The heavens did indeed smile upon us, but our escape today was also possible because we borrowed the luck of these two brats, Sun Quan and Cao Pi.”

“True,” the Lady of Wu replied. “I’ve often heard your uncle, my husband, mention Cao Mengde, so I imagine he is an important figure. Everyone escaped thanks to his blessing.”

Zhou Yu smiled and stretched his sore, numb arms. The Lady of Wu took Sun Quan so he could be a little more comfortable, and Zhou Yu opened the door to the carriage, climbing into the driver’s seat.

“You go sleep more,” Zhou Yu said to Sun Ce.

A lantern lit the road in front of the carriage, and Sun Ce was thoroughly focused on steering the carriage through the night.

“Once we leave Mount Bagong, we’ll be safe,” he said to Zhou Yu, “and Yuan Shu will no longer be able to catch us.”

“There is one more pass,” Zhou Yu said. “You go recuperate. This sentry post may be difficult to cross through.”

“No need to worry,” Sun Ce said, completely confident. “They don’t have Fei Yu.”

Fei Yu appeared, flapping to land on the front of the carriage as it surveyed its surroundings.

“Go a little slower on the downward slopes,” Zhou Yu instructed.

The narrow, winding mountain path delved into the depths of the valley, then through a long canyon, before it exited the mountain. Zhou Yu and Sun Ce sat shoulder to shoulder against the door of the carriage, watching the single lamp sway away, catching white flecks of snow in its light.

“I feel like in this life of ours,” Sun Ce said, smiling, “we’ll probably never run into a situation as dangerous as today’s. When I saw the gates to Shouchun close, I almost thought I would never see you again.”

“I hope you’re right,” Zhou Yu responded mildly. “The coming days stretch long ahead of us, but they shouldn’t be worse than those behind us.”

“Thankfully, my wits were quick in a moment of crisis!” Sun Ce chuckled.

Zhou Yu nudged Sun Ce’s head, and Sun Ce kept laughing to himself. “I’m also good material for being a military advisor.”

Zhou Yu shot him a glance out of the corner of his eye, as if to say, *You?*

Sun Ce smiled as he leaned back, shutting his eyes. The star-filled sky slowly faded as Zhou Yu took the whip, the carriage bearing northeast.

***

Early in the morning, outside Mount Bagong, Zhao Yun lifted the bleary-eyed Cao Pi onto his horse.

“I’ll take my leave now, my two xiandi.” Zhao Yun cupped his hands at Sun Ce and Zhou Yu.

“I will never forget your kindness of coming to our aid,” Sun Ce said to Zhao Yun. “If, in the coming days, you intend to head to Jiangdong, please do come at any time to find Gongjin and me.”

Zhao Yun smiled. “We shall meet again.”

He and Sun Ce saw Zhao Yun off, and under the first rays of the morning sun, he passed through a thick white fog, leaving the valley behind.

Sun Ce shook his head. “What a pity.”

“With how he is,” Zhou Yu said, climbing onto the carriage, “he will not give up his allegiance to Gongsun Zan to serve under you instead. Know when to quit—”

Sun Ce leaped onto the carriage, smiling. “You have such a low opinion of me. Don’t you know how many men with lofty ideals want to join me?”

“You?!” Zhou Yu said. “What visionless idiots want to follow you?”

“There are naturally those with no vision,” Sun Ce said gleefully. “Isn’t there one right in front of me? Hm?”

The corners of Zhou Yu’s mouth quirked upward, and he nearly responded with what was on the tip of his tongue before ignoring him altogether. Sun Ce, however, kept tugging on Zhou Yu, insisting that he explain, and the two of them scuffled as they directed the horses out of Mount Bagong.

But when they arrived at Shanyang County, Sun Jian was not there, as originally arranged. Instead, one of his subordinates, Cheng Pu, had come instead. Seeing Zhou Yu climb off the carriage, Cheng Pu came forward to kowtow.

“My family’s Zhugong thanks Zhou-gongzi for his great benevolence.”

“It was but a trifling matter. No need to be so hung up on it.” Zhou Yu hurried to lift Cheng Pu to his feet.

Since Sun Jian wasn’t there, Sun Ce figured his father must have been caught up in something important.

“General Cheng, is my dad in battle?”

Cheng Pu took off his helmet, revealing his head was streaked with white, and while his face was that of a young man, it bore scars. His hair had gone white in his youth and was especially eye-catching.

“The general accepted the written orders of Yuan-gong and mobilized his troops on an expedition against Liu Biao.”

“What?” Zhou Yu’s heart thumped.

Sun Ce replied as if this were nothing. “What’s wrong with Liu Biao now?”

“Jing Province is unwilling to take orders,” Cheng Pu said. “And because of that, Zhugong is heading there on an expedition. Since it is on the way, he ordered me to escort the madame back southeast to Danyang.”

Zhou Yu pondered this silently. It was a private matter of Sun Ce’s family, so he shouldn’t interject. The Lady of Wu lifted the curtain, asking what had happened, and Zhou Yu reported it just as he heard.

Cheng Pu had brought five hundred men for Sun Ce to take command of, to head south along the river.

Sun Ce climbed onto the carriage and discussed this at length with Zhou Yu. Though Zhou Yu had originally intended to hold his tongue, that Sun Ce so openly spoke of this with him showed that he was already treating Zhou Yu as one of his own.

And so, Zhou Yu considered his words—before the new year, Sun Jian had received his military provisions, and now, the correct course of action would have been to stay at Hangu Pass. However, as Liu Biao of Jing Province had delayed mobilizing his forces time and time again, and Jing Province was historically fought over, Sun Jian coveting it was within reason.

Sun Jian probably also felt the pressure Yuan Shu was exerting on him. If he didn't take over a region and claim himself as its ruler soon, it would be difficult to maintain a balance with Yuan Shu, Yuan Shao, and the others. But selecting a location to call his own was the issue: Sili was out of the question, and if they took Luoyang, enemies would descend on them from all sides. They had no choice but to retreat and choose to head south.

There was Jiangzuo region, which was highly important and where many aristocrats resided with their families. It was right next to Yuan Shu's territory, but taking it would not be as profitable as taking Jing Province. Of course, for any of this to matter, they would need to slaughter Liu Biao. They had justification to wage war against him; he did not accept the orders of the King of Qin, nor did he participate in the campaign against Dong Zhuo. Liu Biao's death would bring joy to the various marquises. No one would send out troops to aid him in the Jing Province.

Zhou Yu had to admit this was indeed an excellent strategy. The only question was if Sun Jian could win against Liu Biao when he went south to Jing Province.

"You must go forth to support your father," Zhou Yu said.

"What can I do with five hundred men?" Sun Ce said. "Relax. Since he sent out his troops, he must have a plan."

"My guess is that as soon as he touches Jing Province, Yuan Shu will immediately be alerted," Zhou Yu said. "We cannot head to Danyang. If

Yuan Shu moves his troops toward Danyang, we'll be dealing with trouble there."

Sun Ce stopped contributing to the conversation.

The Lady of Wu listened and supplied her own comments. "Yu-er speaks rightly. If your father can gain Jing Province, I'm afraid Yuan Shu will only make things more difficult for us. There is no better alternative, aside from returning to Changsha."

"There is," Zhou Yu said. "Come to my home."

The Lady of Wu jumped.

Zhou Yu continued, "Right now, Yuan Shu is most definitely on his way to Danyang, and customs controls will be set up along the two roads to Changsha, but he would never expect us to head to Shu County. Auntie and Sun Quan can stay at my home, and after General Sun gains Jing Province, General Cheng Pu can escort you there. Then, we can reunite in Jing Province."

"I'm afraid that this will trouble your mother…" the Lady of Wu replied.

Zhou Yu said, "How could it? Should you come, she won't even have the time to grow overjoyed before you arrive."

Sun Ce knew Zhou Yu's offer would undoubtedly be of great help. In the span of just a few sentences, he arranged everything all so neatly.

"Gongjin is also missing home, Mother, so there is no need to decline any further," he said.

The Lady of Wu smiled, and accepting Zhou Yu's sincerity, she no longer pushed back.

***

In the spring of the second year of Chuping, less than half a year after Zhou Yu went north, he led Cheng Pu's troops to Shu County.

The soldiers made camp on Mount Gu, sending out only twenty or so people to protect the main party on the way to the Zhou estate. Zhou Yu

returned home, and though he and his mother were only parted a handful of months, many things had happened in the time between. The Lady of Wu and Madame Zhou, on the other hand, were reuniting for the first time in many years, and their eyes filled with tears.

His household immediately sprang to life, and it took another bout of effort on Zhou Yu's part to settle them in one by one. The spring light was bright and warm, and cherry blossoms filled the air. Another spring had come, and finally Zhou Yu and Sun Ce could, peacefully and quietly, live carefree for a few days.

But to Zhou Yu, there was no spring busier than this one.

***

In the garden, Zhou Yu first reported to his mother what happened in Shouchun.

She listened quietly before saying, "Madame Sun told me about this as well. The salary Great General Yuan paid you—Mother saved it all for you. Every month's salary was sealed and placed in the back warehouse. If you are unwilling to take it, all you need to do is send someone to return it to him."

"I know that Yuan Shu must hate me to death with what I've done this time."

"What you have carried out is a righteous matter," Madame Zhou replied mildly. "Yuan Shu is not a righteous person. Why be afraid of him?"

When Zhou Yu thought about it like that, that was indeed the case. People who were not righteous would eventually run out of paths of retreat.

"There is no need to return it. When I was holding that position in the general's manor, I did many things for him. The jade seal ended up in his hands in the end, in exchange for the members of the Sun family, so he cannot claim we have vastly outmaneuvered him."

"Gaining Jing Province, on the other hand, is something Madame Sun is deeply worried about."

“I have no way to deal with that either,” Zhou Yu said. “According to rumors, General Sun does not listen to the words of outsiders. I still have one more request.”

Madame Zhou waited. Zhou Yu voiced it.

She replied, “If you think it will work, then carry it out as you need.”

Zhou Yu nodded. That concluded his report to his mother.

Several days later, he withdrew the silver from their savings. In addition, he liquidated a portion of the business they hadn’t touched in a few years, the four hundred acres of silk fields, thus amassing a small fortune.

***

Several days later, Zhou Yu personally went to the Lu family to see Lu Su.

“I heard you came back a few days ago,” Lu Su said. “Here I thought you would bring your Sun-gege to visit.”

“He’s out shopping,” Zhou Yu said. “I managed to find some time to come here. Have you tallied up all the gold I sent to you a few days ago?”

“Three hundred taels of gold and four thousand taels of silver,” Lu Su said. “It’s almost more than what my family has in our warehouse. What exactly do you want to buy?”

“Here is the list,” Zhou Yu said. “I do not trust anyone else. Only you can carry this task out for me.”

“Ha ha,” Lu Su said, amused, after taking a single glance at the list. “Raising yourself an army? What are you planning?”

Zhou Yu didn’t respond. He merely drank his cup of tea and turned toward the yard, filled with falling peach blossoms.

“It’s not that I’m scolding you, Zhou Gongjin,” Lu Su said, “but even though you look like calm water on the surface, flowing steadily, causing not a ripple, underneath, you’re as turbulent and impulsive as it gets.”

“I’ve already thought it through,” Zhou Yu said. “I’ve thought about it for three years, and we are already in the fourth year.”

Lu Su rose to his feet. “You’re gambling on the Sun family?”

“It’s not a bet in this case,” Zhou Yu mused, taking another sip of tea, not even glancing at Lu Su. “I can only do my best. No one can control the future.”

“Sun Jian is stubborn and set in his ways,” Lu Su said. “It will be difficult for him to accomplish great things. He has fallen out with Yuan Shu. Now, you have offended Yuan Shu as well, along with his son. If Sun Jian isn’t able to gain Jing Province, how will you fare? You just *had* to pick this very moment, rather than earlier or later. The moment you make this decision, you will not be able to turn back.”

“When my dad was alive, he said there was no need to be afraid of people who made promises to others with their lives on the line. Rather, one ought to be on guard around people who said nothing, spending days, months, or even their entire lives to think something over.”

Lu Su looked at Zhou Yu as if he didn’t recognize him.

“It is exactly because some men will never make a decision,” Zhou Yu said, lightly, “that when he truly takes that first step, he will never turn back. Isn’t that the case?”

“All right,” Lu Su said, beginning to smile. “Since you’ve already made up your mind, leave this to me.”

Zhou Yu finished his tea and rose.

“Three days from now, we’ll drink wine on the boats by the shores of Lake Chao. I’ll introduce you to Sun Ce then.”

Lu Su thought for a moment. “We’ll see. Though you may be willing to spend your family’s entire fortune to help him, I haven’t agreed to do so.”

“You will like him,” Zhou Yu insisted, putting down his cup to look at Lu Su. “He and his legendary dad are not alike.”

The corners of Lu Su’s mouth lifted slightly, as if he’d expected those words. Against the backdrop of the entire yard filled with silently drifting peach blossom petals, the sound of Zhou Yu’s wooden clogs faded away, disappearing into the small alleyway.

***

Three days later, brilliant sunlight shone over Lake Chao, and a warm wind roused the waters of the lake. Zhou Yu guided the string of a kite, letting it amble about in the sky, before he secured its string to the prow of the boat.

From under the awning came Sun Ce's bright loud laugh and the sound of Lu Su slapping the table.

"All right!" Sun Ce said, patting Lu Su's shoulder. "I'll take care of it."

"Sun Bofu," Lu Su said earnestly. "There is one more thing, but I am not sure if I should mention it."

Sun Ce placed his hand over the cup, cutting off further wine top-ups. "Speak freely. Gongjin has never been polite to me."

Zhou Yu ducked his head under the awning, crossing his legs and sitting down, straightening his robes as he did. He used his chopsticks to pull out the white fish from the pot. Carefully picking out the bones, he split it among Lu Su and Sun Ce. Lu Su dipped his chopsticks in his wine and drew out a general map of the various states and counties in the Jiangnan region.

"Jing Province is connected to the east and west, and it is crisscrossed by paths heading north and south," Lu Su said, seriously. "News of General Sun, the Polu General, starting a war with Liu Biao must have already spread to Yuan Shu's ears by now."

Sun Ce didn't reply; he merely listened quietly, and Zhou Yu interjected, "Yuan Shu's number one strategist, Yang Hong, is a true schemer. He cannot be taken lightly."

Lu Su waved away his concerns with a hand. "In this region, Jiangling is a patch of land your honored father must gain. This is beyond the grasp of both Yuan Shu and Yuan Shao. This region has the Han River at its back, and the Yangtze to its front, so the waterways are well-developed."

Sun Ce seemed to have noted this as well.

Lu Su continued, “Yuan Shu’s naval troops are weak, but Liu Biao, with Cai Mao and Huang Zu under him, has almost twenty thousand.”

Zhou Yu sank into thought. Lu Su shot Zhou Yu a glance, as if to say, *Why don’t you take over? My part here is done.*

Sun Ce looked at Zhou Yu, who sighed, resigned.

He said, “Zijing and I both feel that whoever gains the naval troops will be able to control Jiangnan. This current battle situation, no matter if it’s the Changsha troops, Yuan Shu’s troops, the Ji Province troops, or even the Xiliang troops, none of them can control boats and train in archery.”

“I understand now,” Sun Ce said. “These days I have been constantly thinking. If Father successfully conquers Jiangling, then gathering up naval troops will become a huge issue.”

“Naturally, Liu Biao will not keep all of his warships at Jiangling,” Lu Su added. “But no matter what, Bofu, you should travel there.”

“Yes.” Sun Ce nodded. “Fei Yu is still gone, so I do not know how the battle is going. But being with Gongjin in Shu County, I have no more lingering regrets.”

***

Bird calls echoed throughout the thousands of mountains, wind swept over the vast plains, and white clouds drifted overhead. The waters of Lake Chao slowed, becoming a bright mirror spanning thousands of miles, reflecting the eternally clear blue sky.

Sun Ce was shopping at the fish market by the lake, Lu Su sitting at the prow of the boat. Zhou Yu stood by him, wearing a bamboo hat.

“What do you think?” he asked.

“He’s someone who can listen.”

“He places higher value in your words than in mine,” Zhou Yu replied. “I urged him to head out as soon as he could to support General Sun, but he treats my words frivolously. Being overly familiar can be bad.”

Lu Su smiled. “Being too familiar doesn’t mean he isn’t listening to you. My guess is that he cannot bear to leave, because you are here to keep him company, and his days here are leisurely. So, under the pretense of taking care of his aging mother, he’s lazing about for as long as he can.”

Under the shade of his bamboo hat, the corners of Zhou Yu’s mouth quirked faintly upward into the hint of a smile. Lu Su tossed his hook out.

“Even my mother said that to find a good wife, I should search for qualities similar to Zhou Gongjin’s…” Without a word, Zhou Yu picked up a pole in both hands to whack Lu Su, who laughed as he ducked. “She has to be gentle and steady, calm yet generous…”

Sun Ce laughed as he stepped onto the boat.

“Gongjin! You’re still in the habit of beating up all your friends? You haven’t grown out of it? Let’s go!”

Zhou Yu pushed off the bottom of the lake with the pole, and he steered the little boat swiftly across Lake Chao.

***

The next day Sun Ce headed toward the mountains, deciding to set off from Mount Gu. He left behind a hundred men at the mountain pass to Shu County to stand guard and send reports. Strangely, Fei Yu had still not returned.

Zhou Yu went to send Sun Ce off. Originally, he’d wanted to head off together with Sun Ce, but someone needed to stay as an overseer. If Lu Su hadn’t needed to buy boats and gather men, Zhou Yu would have sent him along with Sun Ce as well.

“You must not seek battle needlessly,” Zhou Yu admonished Sun Ce.

“I know,” Sun Ce said. “You fuss even more than my mother.”

“Go,” Zhou Yu said. “If anything comes up, send Fei Yu with a message.”

Sun Ce tapped his heels into his horse’s flanks so it moved a few steps away before he turned to look at Zhou Yu again.

“You’re not going to wish your Zhugong the joy of the first victory?”

“You shall be victorious from the start,” Zhou Yu said. “Don’t let your pride get the better of you. Also, it’s summer, so only drink clean water!”

Sun Ce laughed. Zhou Yu wanted to run after him and beat him up, but Sun Ce led his four hundred riders out of the valley with a whistle. Zhou Yu watched for a while longer, then slowly left.

***

From that day onward, Lu Su expended all his efforts. He moved into the Zhou family residence, and he and Zhou Yu, from morning to night, were occupied with verifying costs and balancing the account books. Lu Su purchased a shipyard on the southern side of Shu County. Wood, willow pins, rope, pitch, and such goods were shipped there from all over the Jiangnan region. Zhou Yu often left for three or four days at a time, residing temporarily in the shipyard, and while he was gone, Lu Su would take the chance to go around listening for rumors, as well as recruiting naval troops.

If everything went successfully, the first batch of twenty warships would be ready to enter the water this autumn. But the issue of manning them remained. Zhou Yu went personally to the Shu County governor to discuss this. Since the world today was embroiled in political disputes, no matter if it was Shu County or the entire country, everyone needed regional troops to protect them. The governor was convinced by Zhou Yu’s words, and so a military barracks was established by Lake Chao. Zhou Yu himself brought the new troops he recruited here to practice archery and naval tactics.

***

Spring left, and summer came. In the early summer, Zhou Yu and Lu Su were busy from dawn to dusk. After finally finding some time to go home and visit his mother, Zhou Yu found Fei Yu waiting for him.

Zhou Yu had finally received a message from Sun Ce, which stated that all was well on the battlefield, and in a few days Jing Province would inevitably fall to his father. Sun Ce was waiting for a chance to attack Jiangling County, while Liu Biao was keeping the gates shut, unwilling to fight. Sun Jian was currently formulating a strategy to besiege the city.

Sun Ce's writing was scribbled and messy, and the final words, *Don't worry*, were scrawled in a hurried hand. It was clear he'd written this in the middle of a battle. Zhou Yu stowed the letter away, but just as he was about to report to the Lady of Wu, he heard the sharp sound of porcelain shattering and the Lady of Wu's cry of surprise.

"Auntie!" Zhou Yu shoved the door open and entered, hurriedly helping the Lady of Wu to her feet.

"I accidentally broke a bowl," she said. "I'm really too careless."

Zhou Yu ordered the servants to come and clean up.

"How has Auntie's health been lately?"

"I don't know why," the Lady of Wu responded, "but these past few days, I'm constantly worried and preoccupied. Has Sun Ce written?"

Zhou Yu steadied his nerves and read her the letter. The Lady of Wu grew relieved.

"As long as they are fine, that's good. These days my heart is always in my throat."

"Once the preparation of the naval troops is complete, I'll take a trip to Jiangling," Zhou Yu said.

"I will have to trouble you then," the Lady of Wu replied.

She was clearly still unsettled, and only after Zhou Yu insisted she rest did he walk out into the corridor.

As he stood in the courtyard, without his knowing why, a sense of disquiet settled over Zhou Yu, as if something were amiss over in Jing Province. He chided himself; he always worried for no reason. He sent Fei Yu with a response, telling Sun Ce that Liu Biao's subordinates were fierce generals who wiped out countless invaders, experienced in a hundred battles. He shouldn't take them lightly and should listen to Sun Jian's orders, especially in regards to not backing a desperate foe into a corner.

***

This time, Fei Yu returned even later. Clearly, there were military summons that kept this intelligent white falcon busy. In the fourth month, when the fragrance of the flowers faded and the rainy season was about to start in Jiangnan, Zhou Yu finally received another letter.

Fei Yu flapped in and landed on the table. A bloody cloth was tied to its claw, which drew his gaze and startled his heart.

Chapter 5:
Life and Death

THE RAIN POURED DOWN in a torrent, and lightning struck wildly. Summer had begun in Jiangzuo. With it came a deluge, the heavens themselves dumping rain below with an angry roar. The waters of the Yangtze rose, and the monsoons grew stronger, so much so that every boat was forced to retreat into bays to shelter from the wind.

A lone figure headed southwest, wearing a bamboo hat, only to be halted at the riverbank.

“We can’t take the boats out today!” the shipmaster shouted.

Soaked through, the stranger led a horse behind him. No one knew where he came from. He was bedraggled, his hair, body, and clothes dripping with water. Pulling out a cloth bag, he shook out almost ten taels of silver and slid them onto the counter with one hand. The shipmaster had never seen this much silver before, and he stared dumbly.

As the traveler pushed his hat up a little, he revealed a handsome though ashen-white face—Zhou Yu. His hair stuck to his wet face, yet he was unwilling to take off his hat.

The shipmaster thought for a bit. “I can’t take this! My customer, I know that you have pressing matters, but with such strong wind and waves, and this flood, it’s impossible to cross!”

Zhou Yu pulled out three leaves of gold, pinching them between his fingers, before placing them on the counter next to the silver. They shone with a golden light, and the shipmaster stopped breathing. The wind on the pier was so strong it shook the wooden harbor, pushing it to the verge of collapse. The captains of the boats scurried around, their attention drawn to the two, but no one dared take Zhou Yu’s money.

“I can’t,” the shipmaster moaned. “I really can’t!”

Zhou Yu untied the ancient jade talisman hanging from his belt, placing it alongside the gold and silver.

“That’s what little I have left. Who’s willing to set sail?”

Zhou Yu’s “little he had left” was already enough for quite a few families to live a peaceful, happy life.

One of the boat captains chimed in, “Customer, we’re not trying to fleece you. Even if this humble one loses his life, this money is enough for this one’s wife and son to live off. However, if we take you across the river with these dangerous winds and waves, you, customer, might sink to the bottom of the river. This humble one would not be able to rest again, even as a ghost.”

“That’s right,” another said. “The wind and rain are too intense. After tomorrow, it will probably die down. Can you not wait a little longer?”

Hearing so many appeals, Zhou Yu understood these boat captains had no choice, so he started to put his money away. Suddenly, a hand snaked out, slapping down over the silver taels, the golden leaves, and the ancient jade. Shocked, the boat captains and the crowd quickly dissipated.

Zhou Yu’s eyes followed the line of that arm up, only to find a man over six and a half feet tall, his upper body bare. His build was not burly, but his muscles had been trained in the wind and the rain; he didn’t have too much, nor too little. He wore a lined jacket, and his hair was shorn very short. His face, slick with water, sported the grin of a ruffian. There was a tattoo of an odd fish on his back, and a mala[28] of agarwood wrapped around his wrist. He was a very handsome man, but the air of a bandit surrounded him.

Not five minutes later, Zhou Yu was following that bandit along the river. He used Zhou Yu’s money to buy a boat from the shipmaster and dismissed the boat captain. Of the two ship companies at the Changya Ferry, none of the boat captains for any of their sixteen ships were willing to cross the river. Zhou Yu had been forced to buy his own and follow the bandit.

Wearing a pair of white pants cut off at his knees, his feet bare, he looked like a pounded-in nail, unmoving, as he stood on the rocks.

“You know how to swim?!” the bandit shouted at Zhou Yu.

Zhou Yu nodded.

“Life and death are predestined,” the bandit drawled as he brought the boat over, “and wealth is dependent on the heavens! Once you get on this boat, your life will be in the hands of fate! If you die, then don’t blame this old Gan Xingba! Let’s go!”

“Wait a moment!” Zhou Yu exclaimed.

The bandit’s surname was Gan, his courtesy name was Xingba, and his name was the single character, Ning. He traveled between Jing Province and Yi Province and was one of the overlords of the Yangtze.

At Zhou Yu’s words, he came to a stop on the rocks, not hurrying to get onto the boat. He watched Zhou Yu untie his bundle, take off his hat, and kneel down by the river, formally and properly kowtowing three times eastward.

“Let’s go!” Zhou Yu said once he finished.

The two of them boarded the boat. Gan Ning twirled the pole in his hand, pushing off from the shore, and the little boat sped into the air, shooting toward the center of the river like an arrow leaving a bow.

This single action shocked Zhou Yu. Gan Ning was no ordinary bandit. Zhou Yu had practiced martial arts and his sword skills since he was small, so any normal ruffian would be no match for him. He was also very good in the water, so he hadn’t been afraid of being robbed, but now he realized he had been too arrogant.

The wild winds churned the waves into tall peaks, the surface of the river a raging ocean. Each wave crashed down like a collapsing mountain.

Gan Ning stood at the prow of the boat, singing at the top of his lungs. The world was utter darkness around them, as if the end of the world had come and the heavens and earth were facing destruction. Black clouds roiled as the little boat sailed toward the other shore of the yellow springs,[29] invisible to the naked eye.

With Gan Ning’s upper half bare and his drenched long white pants translucent with water, it was as if he were completely naked, standing majestically among this world, with an odd beauty. Zhou Yu’s hat had long since been swept off by the wind and lost in the river.

“Why are you crossing to the other shore?” Gan Ning asked Zhou Yu loudly.

“To see someone!” Zhou Yu replied, equally loud.

“What family’s son needs to rush?” Gan Ning grinned roguishly. “Hurrying to marry?”

Zhou Yu shook his head helplessly and chuckled, then shouted back, “The Changsha prefect, the Sun family!”

The boat fought through the raging tempest, their two lives dangling from a single string. Zhou Yu no longer saw Gan Ning as a mere bandit. If in the next moment the boat was destroyed and they died, he and Gan Ning would both be buried in equal tombs at the bottom of the river.

Life was just like that. What of glory? What of honor? All of it had grown distant. There was only a single boat and the two of them in this world. All was laid bare, and nothing was worth worrying about.

“Sun Jian?!” Gan Ning asked.

“You know him?” Zhou Yu shouted back.

“You fucking bet I do!” Gan Ning roared. “Three days ago, I was heading back from Jiangxia, and he almost took my life!”

Zhou Yu had never expected he would receive a report of the situation of the front lines here. Ever since he’d gotten Fei Yu’s message, his heart had remained stuck in his throat, and he was terrified some accident had befallen Sun Ce. He traveled day and night, not caring for his own life, just to arrive as soon as possible.

“How is Sun Ce?” Zhou Yu asked.

A huge wave washed over them, almost sending the two into the water. Gan Ning staggered, and Zhou Yu hurried to steady him. With a strip of cloth, Gan Ning bound the two of them together, lashing them to the prow.

“Which son of a bitch is Sun Ce?” Gan Ning yelled.

Zhou Yu blinked.

“Sun Jian’s son!” he said.

“Sun Jian was shot to death by Huang Zu! I don’t know about the others! His son’s probably still alive!”

Zhou Yu had already guessed matters were pressing, but he hadn’t expected they would be so tragic.

“Was he killed by Huang Zu?” he asked.

“At Mount Xian!” Gan Ning roared. “He shouldn’t have chased Huang Zu! But he did anyway! He died to one of Huang Zu’s arrows!”

This was the worst possible news. The world spun around Zhou Yu, and the boat almost tipped over. Gan Ning grabbed Zhou Yu.

“Careful!” Gan Ning asked again, “Who are the Sun family to you?”

“Old family friends!” Zhou Yu said.

Gan Ning didn’t say more.

As they passed the center of the river, the wind and waves seemed to take pity on Zhou Yu and slowly calmed. In less than fifteen minutes, the waters became placid. The dark clouds parted, and a golden sunset shone down over them. Entirely sapped of strength, Zhou Yu realized his martial outfit was somehow even more soaked than before.

He untied the cloth strip, thanking Gan Ning.

With a curt laugh, still standing at the prow, Gan Ning smiled. It didn’t reach his eyes.

Zhou Yu leaned against the stern. He’d never encountered such a dangerous situation before. Sometimes, even if one ruled over the entire world and commanded hundreds of thousands of troops, if the heavens grew enraged, there was nothing one could do.

“You weren’t afraid of this old one sinking the boat and kidnapping you?” Gan Ning asked.

“I wasn’t,” Zhou Yu replied, not even lifting his head as he wrung the water from his robe. “Why would you kidnap me?”

“I’d kidnap you and take you home to be this bandit chief’s wife,” Gan Ning teased.

Zhou Yu flinched then began to chuckle. “Do you really get girls that way, by kidnapping them?”

“This old man often ferried women from good families to the center of the river,” Gan Ning explained, “but as soon as the boat got stuck, they couldn’t go up to the sky or down to the ground, so naturally they would have to come along with me. If you weren’t handsome, this old man wouldn’t have considered ferrying you in the first place.”

Embarrassed, Zhou Yu quickly moved on. “And then what?”

“And then?” Gan Ning asked. “Once we’re done, I let them go home.”

Zhou Yu thought about one lone boat on the vast Yangtze, stuck in the current, and Gan Ning enjoying himself with a woman on board, spending a spring night, swaying along the river. To be so wanton was ludicrous.

The small boat slowly approached the shore, and when Zhou Yu climbed onto land, he turned to say a few words of thanks to Gan Ning.

“Go,” Gan Ning said easily. “No need for any additional fuss. Don’t delay taking care of what you need to.”

“A great kindness cannot be repaid with words alone.”

On the shore, Zhou Yu bowed deeply to Gan Ning. With a flick of his hand, Gan Ning tossed the bag of ancient jade, the silver taels, and the golden leaves over.

Zhou Yu caught it. “Xingba-xiong, you cannot…”

Gan Ning ignored him. With a casual touch of his long pole against the western shore, he departed, backlit by the brilliant golden glow of the sunset. Humming a tune, he left behind the lone figure of Zhou Yu, lost in thought.

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His steed sped over thousands of miles, the bright moon following behind, casting its light across the vast river. It was already the third day that Zhou Yu had spent rushing along the road. He’d bought the best horse money could buy, right on the banks of the river. As he traveled, he saw the

common folk fleeing south with their families, in search of refuge. Even Jing Province was in the midst of chaos, and the round moon shone over uncountable people who had lost their families and their homes.

The sun rose, and night turned to day. Under the cruel heat of the sun, Zhou Yu suffered, drenched in hot sweat, his head spinning. He knew that at this point, if he didn't rest, he would reach his limit. But he had finally arrived—he'd reached Mount Xian. He followed the river north, inquiring along the way, before finally finding the campgrounds of the Changsha troops. He first asked after Sun Ce's status and learned that Sun Ce was fine, but Sun Jian had indeed lost his life, and now his generals were at odds.

Zhou Yu could finally set down the heavy stone in his heart.

The troops tried to stop him, but Zhou Yu handed over Sun Ce's waist tally, and his way forward was unimpeded as he entered the military camp.

***

Within a tent, a group of generals were shouting loudly enough for their voices to reach even the heavens: Cheng Pu, Huang Gai, Han Dang, Zhu Zhi, and Xu Kun were all screaming at each other, and Sun Ce was too, who looked as if he were at the end of his rope.

"At this time, in this moment," Xu Kun raged, "we must not seek revenge! We have less than four thousand men, and the gates to Jiangxia City are tightly shut. How can it be sieged?"

"If we don't go first and besiege the city," Sun Ce replied, taking on the mantle of responsibility, "you think Huang Zu will just let us go?!"

Huang Gai exclaimed, "Sun Ce! This old man knows that because your father just died, you wish to use the grief of the troops to take what is owed you—Huang Zu's life—but generals must not act impulsively. Tell me, how will you besiege the city?"

"If we don't attack Jiangxia," Zhu Zhi said, "Huang Zu will join forces with Cai Mao, cutting off our path of retreat. Even before we leave

Jing Province, we will fall prey to their ambush.”

Sun Ce’s eyes were bloodshot from grief.

He said, “As of today, whether we advance or retreat, we will be caught between a rock and a hard place. We have already fought our way into the center of Jing Province. Old General Huang, don’t you know that as soon as we retreat, the entirety of Jing Province will group together to hem us in? The smaller cities we conquered on our way here will revolt. The two large cities, Jinyang and Jiangxia, will be even less willing to let us pass unchallenged.”

Cheng Pu replied, “With the predicament we are in, our only option is to write a letter to General Yuan and request he send troops to our aid.”

“Impossible!” Huang Gai roared. “If you all are hoping for him to act now, that will be the end of us! Sun Ce! If you can voice a scheme that gives us the upper hand, what harm is there if this old man goes with you to lose his life in Jiangxia?!”

Huang Gai’s temper was the most explosive, and he was also the oldest with the most experience. He stepped forward and grabbed Sun Ce’s collar, continuing, “Who doesn’t know how to get revenge! You think this old man and this group of generals are cowards, afraid of death?!”

“News, sir—Zhou Gongjin of Shu County is requesting to see the generals!”

The entire tent fell suddenly silent. Zhou Yu didn’t wait for them to speak before he walked in. Sun Ce stared at Zhou Yu in disbelief, as if he’d never imagined he would see him again.

Zhou Yu’s entire body was caked in dust, his martial robe smeared with dirt. His lower half was muddy, his hair loose and in disarray. A long sword was belted to his waist, and he was splattered with dried bloodstains.

Cheng Pu, Huang Gai, and the others had met Zhou Yu before, and the rest knew of him. After all, not too long ago he’d saved Sun Jian’s family from Yuan Shu’s manor, giving up his lofty official’s position and the hefty salary he commanded under the aristocratic, politically well-positioned Yuan family to follow Sun Ce.

Within the tent, no one spoke. Zhou Yu looked over the gathered group and nodded, his expression uneasy. He didn't often interact with warriors, having been surrounded by scholars for most of his life. If he spoke too hastily, it would be all too easy to say the wrong thing.

In the end, he quietly said only three words.

He bowed slightly to Sun Ce.

"Greetings to Zhugong."

***

That night, the bright moon disappeared, and an abundance of stars filled the sky. Zhou Yu lay at Sun Ce's side and jolted awake violently.

"Awake?" Sun Ce asked.

Zhou Yu sucked in a hot breath, his head splitting with pain as he gingerly sat up. A little while ago, when they left the main tent, his only thought was to find a place to sleep. Sun Ce was barely speaking, and the two of them were both beyond exhausted. Thankfully, the weather these past few days had been clear, so they found a random pile of dry straw, collapsed onto it, and with Zhou Yu's head pillowed on Sun Ce's arm, both fell soundly asleep.

Even if the sky collapsed, the ground split, and all living beings perished, they'd finally managed to see each other. They could talk after they rested.

Sun Ce only slept for a while. He opened his eyes to watch the sky.

A foot soldier brought over some water, and Zhou Yu washed his face and hands behind the stable. He was still filthy, so he got a few more buckets, and he and Sun Ce bathed in the yard. They both wore only their inner robes, and the summer night breeze was dry but cool. Zhou Yu's skin was finally clean, and he felt much more comfortable.

Sun Ce ordered some food over, while Zhou Yu slapped away at the mosquitoes, his neck bright red from bites. Sun Ce still hadn't said a word. Zhou Yu poured some wine for him, and the two drank in silence.

“Have you come back to yourself?” Zhou Yu asked. Sun Ce didn’t make a sound. Zhou Yu continued, “When I was crossing the river, the wind was so strong and the waves so large that the boat almost sank. Can you guess what I thought about then?”

Sun Ce swallowed a mouthful of wine and raised his reddened eyes to look at Zhou Yu.

“What *were* you thinking? Running here so recklessly! You didn’t even send a letter first.”

“Fei Yu would not have made it,” Zhou Yu said matter-of-factly. “When I got your message, panic all but stopped my heart. If you died, I wouldn’t know what to do. I couldn’t sleep that entire night, thinking that if you were alive, I needed to see you, and if you were dead, I needed to see your corpse. I was not willing to let things simply proceed as they were, so I left in the middle of the night.

“When I was crossing the river,” Zhou Yu said, smiling a little, “I was afraid the boat would sink, but I thought, ‘If it sinks, let it sink.’ If I was a water ghost, at least when you came to cross the river, I could ferry you across.”

Sun Ce sniffled, and his tears poured out at last.

“How’s my mother?” Sun Ce asked once he could speak again.

“She doesn’t know,” Zhou Yu said.

Sun Ce filled up Zhou Yu’s wine. “It’s okay. When I found my dad’s body, I sent Fei Yu to General Cheng, but I didn’t expect it would fly to you instead.”

“Fei Yu thought you were trying to find me.”

After Sun Ce drank the wine, they fell into silence again.

Finally, Zhou Yu asked, “What are the military reports looking like?”

“You can read them later. They’re in my tent,” Sun Ce said. “When my dad died, the troops’ morale plummeted, and no one wanted to fight. Right now, the situation is like our enemy is a butcher’s knife, and I am fresh meat on the chopping block. We need to find a way to retreat to Yang Province and return another day to seek revenge.”

“Yes,” Zhou Yu agreed. “This situation is not yet totally devoid of hope. Let’s see what the circumstances are before coming to a decision. Let’s go—stop thinking about anything else. I’m here now, and whether we live together or die together, both can be considered a happy ending.”

Sun Ce began to smile. They left the yard behind, walking along a small path under the light of the stars as they slowly headed back toward the main military tent. Sun Ce suddenly stopped in his tracks, and Zhou Yu’s heart thumped as he turned to look at him.

Sun Ce’s hands were clenched tightly into fists, and he was sobbing. Zhou Yu didn’t say anything. Instead, he stepped forward and hugged him, the two grown boys tightly embracing each other in the quiet night. Sun Ce gave voice to his mourning, and the sound of his pain echoed under the night sky.

***

It was midnight when Zhou Yu draped his outer robe over the soundly sleeping form of Sun Ce. Then, under the light of an oil lamp, he flipped through the military reports.

After Sun Jian died, no one stepped up to lead this group of dragons. There were many concerns to take care of, but no main commander to deal with them. Right now, the troops were stationed seventy miles from Jiangxia. Jinyang was close on their left, and the secret envoy headed for Shouchun with a military report for Yuan Shu that needed to be sent out. This truly was a mess to tackle.

It was an extremely dangerous situation for the Changsha troops. Within, their wills were scattered, and without, the enemy watched their every move with hostility.

Retreat? Jinyang, Gong’an, and the rest of the surrounding regions would send troops to lie in ambush, and they would probably not even make it out of Jing Province before their entire army perished.

Attack? None of the cities nearby were targets they could afford to fight. Jinyang had twelve thousand troops, while Jiangxia had six thousand.

The Art of War stated it was necessary to have ten times the forces to besiege a city. To conquer Jiangxia, they needed an army of at least sixty thousand. As of today, Sun Ce had less than four thousand men left at his disposal, and a large portion weren't listening to orders. If they were to attack the city now, it would be equivalent to using an egg to smash a rock.

Writing a letter to Yuan Shu asking for aid was even more impossible. The Sun family was completely out of favor with Yuan Shu. Though their split wasn't publicly known, Yuan Shu would, at most, absorb the men and horses Sun Jian left behind. After swallowing them, he wouldn't hand them over to Sun Ce to command.

"What should we do?" Sun Ce asked. "Tell me."

Sun Ce's eyes were closed, and he lay quietly on the bed in the tent.

"Sometimes I would rather be done with it all. I would not have to bear any burdens, nor would I have to do anything. It would be peaceful at least," he said.

"As long as they are mortal matters, there is always a way to resolve them," Zhou Yu responded. "Sometimes, the heavens force people to the brink before giving them a single thread to escape. It will depend simply on if you can grasp that hope or not."

Sun Ce smiled bitterly. "Let's surrender. Either to Liu Biao or Yuan Shu. Draw lots for me, and we'll send out a messenger tomorrow."

"Surrender? Why?" Zhou Yu asked. "Your words don't deserve consideration."

"The soldiers are human. Those are lives," Sun Ce said. "I, however, am alone in the world, and I have no more regrets or burdens to resolve."

"The generals can surrender, but you must not."

Zhou Yu flipped the military report to the next page and pulled a map over it, losing himself in his thoughts as he studied the geography of the riverbanks.

A moment later, he spoke. "If they surrender, they are still generals. If you surrender, you think Yuan Shu will let you be? That's nothing more than the dream of an idiot."

Lifting his brush, Zhou Yu drew a circle on the map, and Sun Ce didn't respond further.

***

The next day, Yuan Shu's messenger arrived.

"Zhugong knows of the situation here," he said, swaggering with pride. "He would like to ask for the opinions of General Sun and the other generals."

Zhou Yu glanced at Yuan Shu's letter. "What did the great general say?"

"The great general," the messenger said, "is willing to send out supporting troops. He already discussed it with General Ji Ling, and he requests that General Sun first return secretly with me. The general's troops are stationed at the outskirts of Jing Province. When the time comes, he'll hand a portion of the troops over to General Sun to command, then come fighting his way back in."

Sun Ce nodded. "After all, openly going head-to-head with Liu Biao is foolish."

"Exactly." The messenger smiled. "The great general also said that, as the prefect of Changsha passed, he shall leave the past in the past. Wentai's numerous contributions during the campaign against Dong Zhuo cannot be forgotten, and the great general is willing to respect Wentai's memory."

"Very good," Zhou Yu said.

Zhou Yu recognized this messenger. He was a member of Yuan Shu's estate, and he bullied both men and women. He had run wild through Shouchun and had even committed a few homicides.

"Then let me communicate this with the rest," Sun Ce replied. "Lord, please wait a moment."

He walked out with Zhou Yu and said, "I should go with him."

Zhou Yu thought for a bit. "What do you think of what he's said?"

“Half true, half false,” Sun Ce said. “I imagine that on the road, he’ll try to kill me, and after doing it, he’ll coordinate aid with Huang Gai, Cheng Pu, and the rest. But he won’t be able to kill me. When he tries, I’ll make my escape and retreat.”

“If I were you, I wouldn’t go with him.”

Sun Ce thought for a bit but didn’t make a sound, only looking into Zhou Yu’s eyes.

“He must die,” Zhou Yu said. “Don’t give anyone a way out. I’ll do it. You bring all the generals here in fifteen minutes.”

Sun Ce sucked in a deep breath and clenched his fists, shaking uncontrollably, but Zhou Yu drew his sword and walked into the tent.

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By the time the group of generals entered, Zhou Yu had already slaughtered the messenger with a single swing of his sword. The messenger’s body was propped against the table, the fresh blood from his neck dripping everywhere. Zhou Yu sat to one side, passively wiping his Chijun Sword clean.

“In place of the departed General Sun, I personally killed this messenger,” Zhou Yu sternly said to the group of generals. “He spoke nothing but nonsense, and his words about the prefect of Changsha were offensive and outrageous. The letter is here, generals. Please pass it around.”

No one blamed Zhou Yu, but Huang Gai grunted angrily. However, he couldn’t do anything about it. The man was already dead—what could be done about it? A corpse could not be revived, and even if they wanted to seek shelter with Yuan Shu, they no longer could.

“Now there’s only one way left,” Sun Ce said. “Surrender to Liu Biao.”

“Sun Ce,” Cheng Pu said. “Do you think Liu Biao, with his naturally timid nature and insidious plans, would accept the surrender of someone whose father was killed by one of his own?”

“We do not need to actually surrender,” Zhou Yu said. “We’ll send the envoy’s decapitated head over, and General Cheng and General Huang will send a secret envoy from our side. You can say there’s been a change in leadership, you’ve already captured Sun Ce, and you wish to offer us up to Liu Biao in exchange for your entire army surrendering unscathed. How’s that?”

Surrendering to Huang Zu was impossible, but Sun Jian hadn’t fought Liu Biao head-on. The two sides didn’t hold any enmity toward each other, but it was hard to say if Liu Biao would accept the surrender.

“And then?” Huang Gai asked, looking at Zhou Yu.

“And then we escape along the way,” Zhou Yu said. “I’ve already arranged it. Shu County will send boats and naval troops to meet us, so we’ll leave along the river.”

“Will that work?” Sun Ce asked.

“Even if it won’t work, it must,” Zhou Yu replied. “This is our only chance. As long as Liu Biao lets down his guard, he’ll grow careless enough to accept the surrender. As we head south, we will pass through Gong’an. We’ll wait for the boats on the pier of Gong’an, then turn back north against the river, heading for Jinyang.

“At this time, this is the best plan available,” Zhou Yu said.

“When will the boats arrive?” Zhu Zhi asked.

“That’s unclear,” Zhou Yu said. “But the letter was sent.”

“How many boats do you have?” Huang Gai asked, releasing a cold snort. “Will there be enough to carry all of us?”

Zhou Yu didn’t respond. He glanced at the corpse of the messenger. A moment later, some foot soldiers came, dragged the body out, and tossed it away. The generals dispersed, each of them heading away to discuss their strategies.

Several attendants brought in water to clean the ground of the tent. Sun Ce strung a bow, while Zhou Yu read the military reports like nothing had happened.

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Since Fei Yu had already left with the letter, they could only wait on Lu Su. Zhou Yu had found himself in many dangerous situations before, but this time, his every move, his life, and Sun Ce's life were all in someone else's hands.

Thankfully Lu Su held that responsibility, and only he could.

Rain began to fall again. Amid the incessant patter of raindrops, it was as if the world had sunk into a dark haze.

On the third day, Fei Yu finally returned.

"Send a letter to Liu Biao immediately," Sun Ce ordered, coming out of the tent. "Do exactly as we discussed."

***

As soon as they carried out the exchange with the messenger, Zhou Yu would release the falcon. Huang Gai and a group of generals trussed Sun Ce up.

"Tie me up as well," Zhou Yu said.

Sun Ce remarked, "I alone am enough."

"You haven't sunk so low that your men would desert you, so if you add me, the Military Affairs General of the Left, it'll seem more believable."

After Huang Gai, Cheng Pu, and the rest discussed this, they agreed to tie Zhou Yu up as well.

"Zhou Yu, the lives of the entire army are now in your hands," Huang Gai said.

"No problem." Zhou Yu let his hands be bound in front of him as he explained, "Lu Zijing is the eldest son of the renowned Lu family of Shu County, and we have been friends since childhood. He will not let me down."

“Whip me a few times, generals,” Sun Ce said, “and spare Gongjin his whipping.”

“You!” Huang Gai couldn’t find it in himself to do as he asked.

Zhou Yu smiled at Sun Ce. “You just like to find reasons for a whipping.”

“I’m always happy to,” Sun Ce said.

Zhou Yu took the whip and struck him perfunctorily a few times.

“Are these mosquito bites?” Sun Ce mocked. “Again!”

Huang Gai watched, dumbfounded. Then he had Zhou Yu press down Sun Ce’s legs, picked up the whip, and harshly whipped Sun Ce three times, eliciting a muffled grunt from him. His outer robes were sliced open, and his skin split. Zhou Yu’s heart twinged at the sight.

“The messenger’s here,” Zhu Zhi said, entering.

Huang Gai lifted the bound Sun Ce and Zhou Yu, leaning them against each other.

“General Huang,” Zhou Yu said, and the man turned. “Act as you see fit.”

Huang Gai nodded and ordered a heavy guard placed outside the tent. Despite Sun Ce’s tattered and torn robes and the mud and dirt smudging his face, he leaned against Zhou Yu, chuckling to himself. Zhou Yu’s forehead was furrowed deeply as he inspected the wounds on Sun Ce’s body.

“They won’t be an issue,” Sun Ce said. “But make sure to act convincingly when we get there.”

“I’m thinking, after we successfully escape, what we should do?” Zhou Yu said. “Should we go back to Shu County first?”

“What do you think?” Sun Ce asked, but Zhou Yu couldn’t decide. Sun Ce continued, “Once everyone successfully escapes danger, I probably won’t be able to fight anymore.”

“Is that what you think?” Zhou Yu looked into Sun Ce’s eyes, but he merely smiled bitterly.

Zhou Yu knew Sun Ce had been frustrated time and time again and was already weary. But this wasn’t the time to try to persuade him, so Zhou

Yu let it be for now.

A while later the tent flap opened, and Sun Ce roared angrily, “You traitor!”

Cheng Pu brought someone in, angrily kicking Sun Ce in the face as he did. Shocked, Zhou Yu lost all color in his face.

“Bofu!”

Sun Ce’s nose bled profusely, and Zhu Zhi shielded the messenger behind him.

The messenger said, “Generals, this is a great service you have done.”

Huang Gai grunted coldly.

“When did you capture them?” the messenger asked.

“Three days ago,” Cheng Pu explained. “This little bastard was restless. I wanted to cut off his head and present it to Lord Liu but realized that couldn’t be justified to Great General Yuan…”

“Good!” the messenger said. “Very good!”

Zhou Yu glared darkly at the messenger, his expression filled with rage.

Huang Gai shouted, “What are you looking at?!”

He stepped forward and slapped Zhou Yu twice, and the corner of Zhou Yu’s mouth started to bleed. The messenger, wearing a set of leather armor and holding a horse whip, lifted Sun Ce’s chin to inspect him, and Sun Ce spat into his face. He exploded into a great rage.

Cheng Pu and Zhu Zhi moved forward, giving him a vicious beating. As Sun Ce slumped to one side, he gagged. Anxiety pulsed through Zhou Yu, his eyes bloodshot. The messenger spoke a few more words, telling the generals to watch them closely, before he and Huang Gai left to go write a letter, as well as to discuss the terms of surrender.

“Are you all right?” Zhou Yu asked. “Bofu?”

“Those were a few harsh blows…”

Sun Ce couldn’t stop coughing, and he hacked up a mouthful of red spit. His lips were split, so Zhou Yu turned his body, offering his shoulder to Sun Ce. With great difficulty, Sun Ce wiped his mouth clean on Zhou Yu’s shoulder before leaning against it.

***

At midnight, guards came in to deliver their meal. They placed a basin on the floor, and the lower-ranked soldier asked, “Should I feed the two of you?”

“I’ll do it,” Zhou Yu replied.

The ropes on Zhou Yu’s hands were in a slipknot, so he freed them and shook Sun Ce awake.

“It’s time to eat, Bofu.”

Sun Ce blearily woke. His eye was already swelling. Zhou Yu fed him first and ate some of the remainder before tying his hands back up. The two of them shrank in the tent, like children that had been beaten, and slept curled up against each other.

When the sky lightened, the guards that the messenger had brought came to retrieve them. Grabbing a fistful of Sun Ce’s hair, they yanked him up before dragging him out of the tent. Sun Ce cursed loudly, but just as Zhou Yu’s concern peaked about them being held separately, someone came and hauled him out as well.

The guards locked them in a wooden prison cart. The moment Zhou Yu laid eyes on Sun Ce again, a heavy burden fell from his heart. Under Sun Ce’s tattered clothes, his pale skin was crossed in bloody lashes from the whip.

“Does it hurt?” Zhou Yu asked, concerned.

Sun Ce shook his head and gestured for him to move closer. The guards outside stuck a wooden stake in, smacking Zhou Yu on the head. It sent Zhou Yu spinning, and he collided with the side of the cage. Sun Ce erupted into a rage, and a loud roar burst forth from him as he rammed into the bars.

He almost broke the cage, and all the guards stepped back in unison, terrified. Zhou Yu quickly leaned up against Sun Ce, knowing he was truly furious.

“Don’t,” he warned quietly.

Sun Ce breathed heavily, incensed, and slowly calmed. An order was issued from afar, and the procession began to move. None of the guards serving as their escort dared to provoke them again.

Zhou Yu didn’t know what Cheng Pu and Huang Gai had told the envoy, but things went more smoothly than he expected, and no one came to humiliate them along the way. Sun Ce slept the entire time. His inflamed wounds started festering, so Zhou Yu grew worried.

“Hey,” Sun Ce said quietly one night, “aren’t you sleeping?”

Zhou Yu turned his head to watch Sun Ce. “You’re feverish.”

Sun Ce’s breaths were hot, and his skin was scorching to the touch. Rain on his wounded body had given him a fever, so Zhou Yu needed to find somewhere to have his illness seen to as soon as possible. They already arrived in Gong’an, and there were two more days until they would reach Xiakou. That was the only chance they had to escape.

“Hang in there,” Zhou Yu said. “Our opportunity is coming soon.”

That night the sky was blanketed by dark clouds, as if the heavens themselves were smiling down on Zhou Yu. In the pitch-black darkness, escape would be simple. But there was the most pressing matter, which made Zhou Yu teeter on the edge of changing his mind—Fei Yu hadn’t returned yet.

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According to their route, with Lu Su leaving Shu County to arrive in Gong’an, it would take him five days with his best efforts. Zhou Yu had sent out the letter three days in advance, and they’d spent two days on the road already. If Lu Su’s ships did not arrive at the port of Gong’an on time, the consequences would be unimaginable.

“Do you still remember?” Sun Ce suddenly asked.

“What?” Zhou Yu stared into Sun Ce’s eyes.

“Ever since we met,” Sun Ce said, “we’ve been on the run because I did not prepare well. I wanted you to come here and be a stylish, carefree jijiu,[30] and we two would conquer the world, side by side. I didn’t think that every single time, I would be dragging you down, turning you into a ranging dog.”

Zhou Yu began to chuckle. “Being born into a turbulent world means one’s life is not one’s own. What does that have to do with you?”

“Has Zijing arrived?” Sun Ce asked.

“Not yet,” Zhou Yu replied. “At least, Fei Yu hasn’t come yet. I’m thinking about what we should do…”

They kept their voices low during this discussion. A guard came over, knocked gently on the bars of the prison carriage, and placed a small dagger on Zhou Yu’s leg before turning and leaving.

Liu Biao’s envoy had brought just under four hundred soldiers with him, and if they abruptly attacked in the dark night, they would be no match for their army. According to Zhou Yu’s plan, they were to kill all of the Jing Province soldiers here, then use the cover of night to flee out of Gong’an, arriving at the port as quickly as possible. They would board Lu Su’s ship, then head south along Chi Bi.

“Attack,” Sun Ce said.

“Wait,” Zhou Yu replied.

“Take a gamble!”

The moment, when it came, was quite unexpected. Sun Ce was the first to slice his ropes apart, and he rammed open the door of the prison carriage. The Changsha troops had slept in full armor tonight, having anxiously been awaiting Sun Ce’s orders this entire time. When they heard the whistle, they all grabbed their weapons and charged at the Jing Province troops.

Four hundred men without a chance to put up their guards were defeated in less than fifteen minutes, and corpses littered the ground. Cheng

Pu dragged the envoy over, and Sun Ce beheaded him with a single swing of his sword.

He mounted a horse, shouting, “Go! To Gong’an!”

“Have the ships arrived?” Huang Gai asked in the darkness.

Zhou Yu didn’t know how to respond.

“Let’s get there first!” Sun Ce shouted back.

The large troop set off in the darkness, moving swiftly along side roads toward Gong’an. This place was not far from Xiakou, and if Xiangyang learned what happened, troops would be sent out tomorrow morning in pursuit.

“How many escaped?!” Sun Ce shouted.

“Quite a few!” Zhu Zhi replied distantly. “But there’s no time to chase them down! Tomorrow the pursuing troops from Xiangyang will definitely arrive! Are the ships already here?”

Everyone was asking, but Sun Ce didn’t even look at Zhou Yu before replying, “They will definitely come! Everyone, hurry!”

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Two hours later, the Changsha troops rushed into the capital of Gong’an County. In less than an hour, the county-level government manor laid down their arms and surrendered. They had no way to fight back against thousands of Changsha soldiers. The troops took over all the horses and weapons in the city and retreated to the pier.

The sky was faintly growing brighter, turning the river gray. A dense fog rose off the surface of the river, cloaking it, and it was impossible to see more than a few feet away. In the distance came the sound of water, and Zhou Yu, wrapped in a long, dark blue robe, his feet bare, stood on the pier, blowing into a whistle. The sound of the whistle echoed into the fog.

Zhou Yu watched quietly.

Lu Su was not here.

“General Huang, General Zhu Zhi,” Sun Ce said from atop his horse, riding past the troops, “you two are in charge of preparing strongholds outside the pier and setting up stakes for defense!

“General Cheng,” Sun Ce continued, “bring one thousand men and scatter them through the city. Arm them with bows, and have them lie in wait on the rooftops! Prepare for a dogfight in the streets!”

“Wait a little longer,” Zhou Yu said.

The entire pier was filled with a deathly silence while Zhou Yu held the bamboo whistle in his hand, facing the rushing waters of the river.

The sun rose, and the dense fog dissipated like ghosts swirling in a long night, revealing the light of the golden-red sun coating the river. Faint shadows appeared amid the shadows of the mountains in the distance.

Zhou Yu blew the bamboo whistle with all his might, its sound piercing the heavens. The whistle carried in it an undisguisable waver of agitation.

A bird screech resounded through the air in response!

Fei Yu spread its wings and soared across the sky. The beat of drums rose up all along the river, and some forty-odd new ships, draped in the light of the dawn, approached the pier.

The Changsha troops cheered thunderously. Zhou Yu almost slumped over onto the pier. They were finally here.

“Lu Zijing!” Zhou Yu shouted angrily. “If you hadn’t come today, I would have lost my life!”

Lu Su called back from a distance, “We ran into a flood on the way, but we held out! We aren’t late, are we?”

Sun Ce smiled as he yelled, “You’re here now. All is well!”

The large boats anchored along the shore in twos and threes, and the moment the Changsha troops retreated onto them, they raised their sails and left Gong’an. Just as they did, hundreds of warships appeared, floating after them, and drums beat loudly, instantly turning the center of the river into a battleground.

Damn! Zhou Yu's heart pounded. He thought he'd accounted for the heavens and the earth, but he hadn't considered this!

"Return to shore, quickly!" The drumbeats thundered, and Zhou Yu immediately ordered, "Line up in formation!"

The flag bearers raised the flags and the forty-two ships turned, without even the slightest intention to retreat.

"We're not leaving?" Sun Ce asked.

"We can't leave now!" Zhou Yu roared back. "Lu Zijing! You control the left wing! Bofu, you go to the right wing! Use the flags as signals!"

Sun Ce sprang into action and leaped up, swinging across on a rope fixed to the mast toward another ship.

Liu Biao had sent his general Cai Mao to swoop in and kill them. After he raised his flags and declared his intentions, only to see the enemy was not surrendering, their arrows came pouring down like rain.

The Changsha troops' warships turned, shifting into two wings that outflanked the enemy. Cai Mao's large army was like a huge fish, while Zhou Yu's water troops moved like a flying eagle, spreading its wings in flight as they shifted to engage!

"Central division, break through!" Zhou Yu shouted.

He stood at the prow while slings of arrows rushed toward him in a torrential storm. The guards raised their shields and rushed forward. Zhou Yu couldn't spare time for flag signals, so he placed his bamboo whistle at his lips and blew it.

"Break through!"

"Master Zhou!" the commander of the water troops shouted. "The warships have yet to be tested for direct collision…"

"Break through!" Zhou Yu shouted. "All consequences will be mine to bear!"

The central division raised their paddles fiercely, letting out earthshaking shouts, before charging right into Cai Mao's vanguard!

There was an explosive crash, and Zhou Yu called out, "Left and right, close in!"

The left and right wings folded in, closing in doggedly on Cai Mao's vanguard. The Jing Province naval troops had been taken off guard and tried to retreat, but as soon as the warships collided, gangplanks landed, bridging the ships. The Changsha troops, weapons in hand, rushed onto the enemy ships, slaughtering as they went. Every single one of their soldiers was as good as ten.

Zhou Yu had been waiting for this exact moment. With his long robes fluttering, the Chijun Sword in hand, he charged ahead of the soldiers across the gangplank!

"I'll assist you!" Sun Ce roared.

Sun Ce held his Panlong Staff and rushed over, raising it and sweeping in a broad arc. The mast of the ship broke under the blow and came crashing down.

Zhou Yu, the bamboo whistle dangling from his lips, was winded. Once he caught his breath, he blew it, and when Lu Su heard the signal, he beat the gong.

The ships on the battleground tangled together. Cai Mao's large forces were stuck in the center of the river, unable to make it through. From the rear, Cheng Pu's fire arrows flew haphazardly through the air like red clouds storming toward them.

At the very last moment, the ships of the Changsha troops retreated swiftly, and the Jing Province warships, damaged and split from their battering, sank in the water. Zhou Yu gave his orders. The river was narrow around the Gong'an pier, and the center of the channel was blocked by several ships. Cai Mao would be unable to follow. Gongs sounded all around them. The entire army disengaged and retreated, not losing even a single ship.

A brisk wind rose, filling the sails of the ships, and ten thousand oars rose and fell in unison as they put a good few miles between them and their enemy. They'd lost Cai Mao behind them. Huang Zu's army filled the Gong'an pier, while Sun Ce, Zhou Yu, and Lu Su stood shoulder to shoulder at the head of the ship.

Sun Ce raised his voice. "Huang Zu! You and I have a blood debt; we cannot coexist under the same sky. The day will come when Sun Bofu will

cut your head from your neck, as an offering to my father's spirit!"

The black mass of troops on the pier of Gong'an slowly grew distant before vanishing on the horizon. The forty-two large ships, carrying over four thousand Changsha troops, rode the wind and the waves down the Yangtze, returning to Jiangnan.

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Five days later, in Shu County, the last rainstorm passed, and the waters slowly receded. The Changsha troops were garrisoned on the western bank of Lake Chao, just north of Mount Gu, where Dian Wei's[31] troops changed their camp into a garrison, once upon a time. Bubbling water flowed from the mountain streams into Lake Chao, and it was only then that everyone could catch their breath.

During Sun Jian's funeral procession, the Lady of Wu cried ceaselessly. The entire army attended to see him off. He was buried temporarily at the cemetery on Mount Gu.

The mute monk, who hadn't left the mountain in many years, held prayer beads in his hand as he sent Sun Jian off on his final journey on the slopes of the mountain. Sun Jian's body was interred in Shu County but would be moved to the Sun family grave in Changsha in the future.

At the same time, Yuan Shu's secret letter offering amnesty arrived in Shu County.

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Sun Ce, his eyes red, walked along the mountain path. He turned his head back, and with his position as the eldest son, led Sun Quan to the Mute Temple on Mount Gu to pay their respects. The mute monk refused to see him. Zhou Yu washed the cups by hand in the tea room.

The Lady of Wu was at Zhou Yu's mother's home, leaving Zhu Zhi, Huang Gai, Cheng Pu, and Xu Kun with them. Han Dang already returned

to the garrison to oversee the men.

With everything taken care of, it was time to decide their future path. The Changsha troops had come all this way and stationed themselves here, and Yuan Shu's secret envoy had stolen the seal of the Changsha prefect when Sun Jian died. Changsha was no longer the Sun family's territory, and there were only these four thousand, one hundred and twelve men; an army with no leader.

Lu Su closed the door from the outside, and the paper door let out a dull thud. The tea room was filled with unease and stuffiness.

"Come, generals, please drink some tea." Zhou Yu finished washing the cups, handing them one by one to the four great generals. All were loyal men, including the absent Han Dang. When Sun Jian was defeated and perished, the generals were given many reasons to toss Sun Ce aside and leave. For them to follow him all this way, with an uncertain future, was no easy undertaking.

"Over these past few days," Huang Gai said, "everything we achieved was thanks to you, Zhou Gongjin. If it wasn't for you going around the Shu County magistrate, we wouldn't even have a place to rest our bones."

The entirety of the Changsha troops had left their belongings behind, except for the last of their provisions, and as of now, they were depending entirely on Zhou Yu for their survival. Zhou Yu didn't dare take even a shred of credit for himself.

"Everyone is doing this for Zhugong."

But he knew very well that even though he supported Sun Ce as their leader, the others might not. After all, Sun Ce was young, and everyone in front of them had followed his father when he took on the position of prefect, so they were all his seniors. Even if they were willing to follow Sun Ce, he might not be able to control them.

Not to mention, Sun Ce was still dealing with losing his father. Residing at Lake Chao was temporary, and with this many troops stationed in Mount Gu, Yuan Shu would find an excuse to invade sooner or later. The magistrate of Shu County was unwilling to take on such a heavy responsibility.

When they returned, Zhou Yu already had an agreement with the county magistrate for a grace period of three months. He explicitly stated that the Changsha troops were only passing through and residing temporarily here, and when the time came, the entire army would leave. They would not disturb the residents. Only with those promises did he win them a short reprieve here.

“Everyone is clear on how things stand currently,” Cheng Pu said, sighing and downing his tea in one go. “Residing in Mount Gu as guests is a temporary solution, so we must find a permanent one. What do the other generals think?”

Huang Gai was the eldest, and among the generals, he was also the most powerful. When Sun Jian was alive, Huang Gai and he were so close that he called Sun Jian “xiong.” Usually when he spoke, his tone indicated that he didn’t really consider Zhou Yu, Sun Ce, and other youngsters worthy of importance. But in this moment, he didn’t rush to speak.

Instead, he drank a mouthful of tea and asked, “What does Gongjin think?”

Zhou Yu was silent for a moment. From the garden outside, he heard the sound of Sun Ce talking with the young acolyte. Zhou Yu’s position right now was awkward. In name, he was Sun Ce’s strategist, yet currently it was he who was providing the entirety of the Changsha troops with a garrison, and he was the one who had put in the most effort. It was as if he were the master of Shu County: Huang Gai and the rest were guests, while Zhou Yu was their host.

Even though he was technically the head of a large family and master of the city, Zhou Yu didn’t have the mindset of a master and frequently intervened in the internal struggles of the Changsha troops. He knew his actions were explainable only due to extraordinary circumstance. In any other situation, he would have been overstepping his authority. That would not only affect his own reputation; Sun Ce could not explain that away so easily either.

Thankfully the group witnessed Zhou Yu travel thousands of miles to search for Sun Ce, and even in dire straits, he did not give up or leave, instead choosing to live or die with him. They had finally accepted this latecomer strategist as one of their own.

“At the bottom of it,” Huang Gai suddenly said, “as of today, there’s no need to treat you as an outsider. It’s a pity the lord prefect left us early; otherwise, with your skill, under the command of the Changsha office, you would easily find a post.”

“The past is already in the past,” Zhou Yu said, at a loss. “There’s no purpose in speaking further on it. If you’ll allow me to ask a question out of turn, what do you generals have planned?”

No one responded to that. The tea room sank into a long silence.

The paper door slid open, and Sun Ce pulled off his wooden clogs and entered. Zhou Yu wanted to rise, but Sun Ce pressed his shoulder down, so he remained seated.

“It’s done?” Zhou Yu asked.

Sun Ce nodded silently, picking up the cup Zhou Yu used and drinking the rest of his cold tea. Zhou Yu refilled it, and Sun Ce finished it, evidently very thirsty. They continued like that until Sun Ce had polished off the entire pot of tea. Sun Ce’s throat bobbed, and he slowly settled, but it seemed like he was hiding something by drinking.

“I am sorry for your loss,” Huang Gai said solemnly, letting out a long breath. “Victory and defeat are frequent occurrences for those born into military families. Fighting and dying on the battlefield is common. Generals are close to those who wield weapons, so they know where they will be buried one day. Your father made his mark on Jiangdong, and no one among Dong Zhuo, Lü Bu, or the others was able to block his courageous troops. His death was truly a fitting one.”

Sun Ce nodded. Zhou Yu lifted the kettle and went into the yard to fill it with water, only to see the mute monk sitting under the hallway in front of the front hall. He wrote a set of couplets while the young acolyte ground ink for him.

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The dark clouds parted, and the afternoon sunlight came streaming in.

As Zhou Yu washed his hands, he listened to the discussion coming from the tea room.

Sun Ce spoke. “Last night, Gongjin and I agreed that, based on the current situation, it would not be beneficial to remain here for long. Even if Shu County doesn’t care, it’s still not a good long-term plan.”

Zhou Yu remained silent as he placed the kettle under the bamboo spout to fill it with water, watching butterflies flutter among the flowers.

“What do you have planned?” Huang Gai asked. “Zhou Yu named you his lord, and maybe everyone has the same thought in mind today. But you are hasty and quick to act, so you must think things over before you take action. We uncles have not mentioned this to you, but you must be wary.”

Sun Ce was quiet for another while before he continued, resolute, “Yuan Shu’s letter has come, and I’ve decided. Generals, break camp and set off. We’re going back to Shouchun.”

“You’ve truly thought it through?” Cheng Pu asked.

“Yes.” Sun Ce nodded, his eyes resting on the silhouette of Zhou Yu’s back in the yard. The kettle was completely filled and water slowly seeped out of the spout, gurgling. Zhou Yu’s arms were crossed in his sleeves, yet he did not turn his head.

“Gongjin is right,” Sun Ce said, letting out a sigh. “Yuan Shu only fears me, Sun Ce. If you generals were to pledge yourselves in service to him instead, you would be treated generously. Today, my Changsha army is homeless and destitute without a place to rest our heads. It’d be better to save your strength and join Yuan Shu’s troops.

“Allow me the time to compose a missive,” Sun Ce said, looking into each of their eyes, one by one, “so I may give up my military power and hide myself on Mount Gu. Generals, when Yuan Shu takes you under his command, do not mention me too much. Simply say that my heart is like ash, and I have no desire to seek revenge. I want to be a turtle hiding in its shell on Mount Gu, on the banks of Lake Chao, and that will suffice.” Sun Ce said this in a teasing tone, yet no one laughed.

“As for swearing yourselves to Yuan Shu, the sooner you do, the better. As for what you do after that, I will allow Uncles to do as they see

fit. Yuan Shu is a man who loses sight of his goal because of his greed, and he is petty and narrow-minded…”

Zhou Yu spoke from within the yard. “Yuan Shu holds the imperial seal. With his personality, he will choose an auspicious day and declare himself emperor.”

No one responded. Zhou Yu carried in the kettle, and he set it on the stove.

“Whoever proclaims himself emperor in the current situation will be branded as traitor to all. Yuan Shu’s days are numbered. All we need to do is wait for him to bring about his own demise before we take the opportunity to conquer Shouchun.

“And though the generals here would pledge themselves to Yuan Shu,” Zhou Yu said, “I imagine none of you are at the same level of trash as that bastard. Those that walk different paths cannot plan together, so all you need to do is hide your abilities and bide your time, waiting for Sun-lang’s edict to arrive.”

“Exactly,” Sun Ce replied. “Suppress yourselves and wait. Bring your four thousand men and my letter to Yuan Shu. Leave a hundred with me in Shu County; that will be enough. How does this plan sound to you?”

***

Fei Yu left and returned, and the day the Changsha troops broke camp and set off, Cheng Pu and the rest shed a tear or two. Though Zhou Yu’s plan seemed flawless, nothing in this world was certain, and no one knew what awaited them in the future. After the group bade farewell to Sun Ce, they led the main force of the Changsha troops away from Mount Gu.

Zhou Yu and Sun Ce walked slowly back along the mountain path. The autumn air was clear and crisp, and the mountain wind rustled through the trees. In the past days, Sun Ce had spoken very little, so little that he was almost a mute. Sometimes Zhou Yu had even suspected Sun Ce wanted to remain on Mount Gu, free himself from the passions and desires of the mortal realm, and practice meditation with the mute monk. But after he’d

made up his mind, his entire being was like a bud in the winter snow, gradually coming alive again.

“Sun-lang,” Zhou Yu said.

“You might as well call me ‘Hey,’” Sun Ce said, walking without turning back. There was a hint of a smile in his voice. “What are you being so distant for? Everyone else calls me Sun-lang. Are you following their example?”

Zhou Yu chuckled.

Sun Ce turned his head and glanced at Zhou Yu. “Want to fly kites?”

“All right.” Zhou Yu nodded.

Sun Ce bought a kite in the market next to the lake. Just like when they were small, Sun Ce tugged the string and walked in front, while Zhou Yu released it. The kite flew upward, directly into the blue sky above.

“I’m going to say something. Don’t pretend like you don’t want to hear it,” Zhou Yu said.

“Say it!” Sun Ce tugged the line, intently watching the kite fly in the sky.

Zhou Yu said, “Your dad’s generals are like a Jianghu faction. If things continue like this, it will not be appropriate in the long run.”

“The old man never thought he would die,” Sun Ce said, turning his head and glancing at Zhou Yu. “Do you understand?”

Hearing Sun Ce speak this way, Zhou Yu knew he had finally moved on.

Sun Ce’s pain and grief had calmed itself faster than Zhou Yu’s had. When his father died, Zhou Yu needed a whole three years to recover himself before he managed to move on. But Sun Ce could already smile.

“The subjects are not like subjects, while the master is not like a master,” Sun Ce said. “Ever since he gathered an army and began to serve the imperial court, things were that way. He was like the eldest brother of a faction. He called his subordinates brothers, making it so that not a single one of them was willing to bow to another, and he could barely keep them under control. When he was here, that worked, but now that he’s gone, he

left behind a mess for me to clean up, so all these bad practices are surfacing.”

“How are you planning to handle this?” Zhou Yu asked.

Sun Ce tilted his head up. The kite flew high into the sky, and Sun Ce handed the string to Zhou Yu. “Since you’ve asked, it’s clear you’ve long since planned something yourself.”

“Your subordinates,” Zhou Yu said, “include far more than just them. If this plan succeeds, you must understand you are the young master of Changsha. You must not repeat your father’s mistakes.”

Sun Ce nodded, and Zhou Yu continued, “A lord is a lord, while subordinates are subordinates. Since you understand, let’s begin with me.”

Zhou Yu wore a hint of a smile on his face. He thought Sun Ce would freeze.

Instead he replied, face bright and sunny, “No.”

Zhou Yu blinked.

“In this matter alone,” Sun Ce said, “I cannot compromise.”

Zhou Yu was at his wits’ end dealing with Sun Ce, who simply turned his head forward again.

“But don’t worry, I know what to do.”

Zhou Yu could do nothing more than trust him. After all, he did not wish Sun Ce to follow his every sentence to the letter. At least with things to think about, his mood would slowly improve. Just like how when Zhou Yu’s father died, Sun Ce spent every day not saying anything, simply keeping him company.

Sometimes he knew that though Sun Ce claimed it, he would not be happy to live out the rest of his life in Shu County. In just a few days, the knot in his heart loosened, and he acted like a big monkey again, playing about and causing trouble.

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The autumn solstice arrived, along with a secret letter from Shouchun. Cheng Pu and the other generals had already changed their allegiance, and Yuan Shu was greatly pleased. He arranged posts for them immediately and sent money and rations to placate Sun Ce, along with a letter persuading him to leave the mountain and be a martial official once more. Sun Ce knew this was a trap. If he went to Yuan Shu's manor, how would he walk out of there alive?

He and Zhou Yu discussed it, and Zhou Yu dictated while Sun Ce penned his words, replying with a copious few thousand words. In short, he needed to pay respects to his father for three years and could not desert such a duty; he'd fought all his life and already sprouted white hairs. His body was riddled with wounds, and his heart was exhausted. Remaining in Shu County would bring him peace.

Zhou Yu was not satisfied, but he had no choice but to send that letter on his behalf. Sun Ce folded up the letter and smiled.

"I truly do think that."

"Think what?" Zhou Yu asked, putting the ink box away.

As if he'd already thought this over, Sun Ce replied, "When I was out fighting in Luoyang and Changsha I often thought of your home. When you told me to let my mother and yours live together, I responded with nothing but encouragement.

"No matter how large the world," Sun Ce said, putting the letter away, "only this place is home. Everywhere else is nothing more than a temporary place of rest. Only the blue waves of Lake Chao and the beautiful views from Mount Gu can bring peace to my heart."

Zhou Yu replied, "Back during the previous dynasty, people said this was a land of plenty because the scenery is so picturesque, untouched by the flames of war, even during the Qin Dynasty. But we can only discuss that when our battle is finished, as the land of tenderness is the downfall of many heroes. After this year passes, we must not tarry here."

"Who's your land of tenderness?" Sun Ce asked, grinning.

Zhou Yu pitched a wooden cup at him, which Sun Ce nimbly snatched from the air, only for the water in it to splash all over his head.

He laughed as he walked out the door to give the letter to a messenger.

The Lady of Wu and Madame Zhou seemed to be staying completely out of their business. Originally Sun Ce planned to help Zhou Yu organize the family business during his time here, but when he found a record book, he saw almost all the silk fields and stalls were liquidated, leaving behind some tens of acres of ancestral land and less than a thousand taels of silver.

“You sold off all the businesses that your ancestors passed down?” Sun Ce asked.

Zhou Yu sat with an arm wrapped around Sun Quan as he taught him to write. He raised his head and glanced at Sun Ce.

“Aren’t the ancestral fields still there?”

“What did you spend all the money on?”

“Buying ships, training troops, and gathering soldiers,” Zhou Yu said. “I handed it all over to Lu Zijing.”

Sun Ce held the record book and stood for a long while without making a sound, before turning to search through the reports on running the army that Lu Su sent every month. He stared at them, then at Zhou Yu, then back at the report.

“What are you looking at?” Zhou Yu didn’t know what he was trying to do. “Is there something on my face?”

“Lu Zijing is a talented man.” Sun Ce chuckled, but when he looked back down at the report something seemed to drip from his eye onto the page. He put the book away and walked into the yard, sitting down and staring blankly into the clear sky of late autumn.

With a kind tone and gentle words, Zhou Yu taught Sun Quan how to compose an essay. Compared to the impatient Sun Ce, Sun Quan evidently preferred Zhou Yu. Without any due cause, he’d hug Zhou Yu’s neck and act spoiled, and sometimes he’d even make jokes about him.

“What are you planning on doing after spring comes?” Sun Ce asked from his position in the corridor, facing away from Zhou Yu and the sticky Sun Quan in his lap.

“I don’t have any plans,” Zhou Yu replied offhandedly. “I’ll stay here. What plans could I have?”

“I’m planning on crossing the river to seek out my maternal uncle,” Sun Ce said.

“Oh,” Zhou Yu said lightly, a cunning, smug smile hanging about the corners of his mouth. “You can’t sit still any longer?”

“Can I come?” Sun Quan immediately piped up.

Zhou Yu made a shushing gesture toward Sun Quan.

“I’m also planning on crossing the river to find my uncle,” Zhou Yu said. “You can find your uncle while I find mine.”

“Don’t try to pull the wool over my eyes,” Sun Ce said, taken aback. “What uncle?”

“On my father’s side,” Zhou Yu said, beginning to smile. “My father’s older brother.”

“Why are you looking for him?” Sun Ce asked.

Zhou Yu didn’t reply. Sun Ce added, “Can you bring me along?”

“Hm,” Zhou Yu said, a smile in his eyes. “Let me consider it.”

“I’ve heard of someone offering up a city as a dowry before…”

“If you keep being so slippery with your words, I won’t bring you along,” Zhou Yu said with a straight face.

Sun Ce hurried to beg pardon before rising.

“Your uncle is the prefect of Danyang, Zhou Shang, is he not?”

Zhou Yu nodded.

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The winter was particularly cold, and just as the last month came, a heavy snowfall sealed the doors. The warships on the banks of Lake Chao were pulled up onto the shore, and Lu Su no longer trained his troops. Zhou Yu and Sun Ce went out of their way to check on him, and the three paid their respects to Madame Zhou and Madame Sun in Zhou Yu's house. They drank light wine and ate the four-colored vegetables of red, yellow, green, and black. It was almost New Year's, and for a time, the weather warmed, so the yard was filled with the brilliant purples and bright reds of fresh blossoms, each petal flourishing with life.

After they celebrated New Year's, on the second day of the first month, both families paid their respects to their ancestors. Sun Ce and Zhou Yu also paid their respects to their deceased fathers before the two packed their bags. That coincided with a cold spell, so the mountains and valleys were filled with an icy chill. They wrapped themselves in thick fur cloaks, bade farewell to their mothers, and prepared to set off.

Zhou Yu brought along less than a hundred taels of gold, as he and Sun Ce were preparing to visit Zhou Shang in Danyang first, then Wu Jing in Wu Commandery. After all, they were both of their own families. Since the current political situation was still unstable, they would probably receive some assistance.

It had been a good half a year since Sun Ce left Mount Gu; he had remained there since he came to Shu County. When he arrived, he was in high spirits, having just come off the battlefield. Today he was all alone in the world, except for Zhou Yu keeping him company.

They journeyed leisurely during the day, admiring the scenery, while at night they slept in one bed, so close there was no space between them. Sometimes heavy snows would blanket the sky, and when the cold weather hit, they didn't insist on hurrying. Instead they stayed in waystations, chatting, drinking wine, and warming themselves by the fire. The topics of their conversations were elegant and interesting.

Ever since the day Zhou Yu forded the river, this section never froze over. Now they traveled amid heavy snow that danced around them like cotton as they headed north on a boat. Zhou Yu heard a particular tune and began to recall that arrogant, bossy Gan Xingba.

“What are you thinking about?” Sun Ce had his hands stuck in his sleeves, huffing out white fog. Zhou Yu glanced at him and smiled but didn’t directly answer him.

“In a while, when we meet my uncle,” Zhou Yu cautioned, “you better be straightforward.”

Sun Ce was carrying a traveling pack on his back. He hopped off the boat.

“Okay.”

Zhou Yu continued, “In front of him, you must not argue with me for the sake of arguing. Never mind others—you’re already used to pointlessly arguing with me, but my uncle is very prudent. A few teasing sentences may be a slight to him.”

“When have I ever argued with you for the sake of arguing? You simply can’t beat me in a verbal battle, so you find fault—”

“You’re arguing for the sake of it right now!” Zhou Yu said angrily, veins popping out on his forehead.

Sun Ce laughed.

Zhou Yu added, “When you see him, make sure you obey what he says. You can give me some face, but don’t overly boast…”

“Why does it sound like I’m meeting my father-in-law?” Sun Ce asked. “Are you my wife? He won’t think your husband is poor and send me packing with a few swats of a rod, will he?”

The joints in Zhou Yu’s knuckles cracked from how hard he clenched his fists.

Sun Ce hurried to reply, mock-seriously. “I swear I won’t say a single word I’m not supposed to.”

“You…” Zhou Yu grabbed Sun Ce’s collar. “If you fool around, you’re getting two beatings.”

“I get it,” Sun Ce said, nodding his head. “One beating from you, the other from your uncle.”

“As long as you understand,” Zhou Yu replied, smiling as gently as the spring breeze.

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When Zhou Yu arrived at the Danyang estate and handed over his visiting card, he surprised the entire estate's worth of people. Sun Ce peeked around, following Zhou Yu like an attendant. Zhou Shang was in the middle of conducting a town hall session, so there was a group of scholars in the yard, and he didn't have the time to look after Zhou Yu. Like a light cart traveling over familiar roads, Zhou Yu ordered the kitchens to prepare some snacks, which he brought over to Sun Ce himself. The two of them ate in the gatehouse.

Though spring was here, it was still cruelly cold, and both their faces were red from the chill.

"You don't need to go to Shouchun to reach Danyang, and your uncle's estate isn't lacking," Sun Ce said. "Why'd you go running off to Shouchun at all?"

The corners of Zhou Yu's mouth twitched.

"I wonder which forgetful person it was who told me to meet him in Shouchun? Why else would I go running there for no reason?"

Sun Ce remembered now. Zhou Yu went there to slave away under Yuan Shu's command for Sun Ce's sake. He scratched his head and smiled abashedly, trying to find something to say.

Zhou Yu was still nervous, so he told Sun Ce, "My uncle has always looked down on others, so if he tries to antagonize you, you must stay calm. For my sake, if nothing else."

Sun Ce watched Zhou Yu, torn between laughing and crying.

Still worried, Zhou Yu confirmed, "You hear me?"

With a pat on the back of Zhou Yu's hand, Sun Ce comforted him. "You can rest assured. Do you think me that easily provoked? For you, I've taken a whole cartful of stabs; how hard can it be to keep my head down?"

"You don't need to keep your head down for him to look down on you."

“Then what do you *want* me to do?” Sun Ce asked helplessly. “If I simply don’t speak, that’ll work, right? Then he’ll blame you for bringing a block of wood along.”

Zhou Yu knew he was overly anxious, so he couldn’t resist laughing loudly.

He thought for a bit. “Ah, forget it, let things go how they will. Say whatever you want. A few sentences can’t hurt.”

As they were speaking, Zhou Shang sent a servant to invite them over. Zhou Yu straightened his robes and rose, walking into the courtyard, before suddenly turning to straighten Sun Ce’s robes as well. Sun Ce was a bit taller than Zhou Yu, and on their way here, snow had covered his robes. After it had melted, he’d draped his robe by the stove to dry it, and since he’d hurried to put it on, he hadn’t had time to check it.

Zhou Yu trailed behind Sun Ce, turning the collar out to show the inner mink fur lining, then knelt down on one knee, neatening the hem.

“Stop, if your uncle sees this he’ll scold us…” Sun Ce said.

“The old man hasn’t come yet,” Zhou Yu said. “Don’t worry, that man—”

“Zhou Yu!” a severe voice said from under the eaves of the corridor.

A cold shiver shot down Zhou Yu’s back. Sun Ce had never imagined Zhou Yu could fear anyone, so he stood there awkwardly for a long while, unable to think of a response. In the corridor stood a broad-shouldered, broad-waisted civil official. Though there was no rage in his eyes, his gaze was imposing.

Zhou Yu scrambled to rise and bow with his hands cupped. “Uncle.”

This man was Zhou Shang. Sun Ce smiled slightly, neither too humble nor too arrogant, and he cupped his hands and greeted him.

“Prefect Zhou.”

“Mm.” Zhou Shang already knew who Sun Ce was, as Zhou Yu’s writ of visitation had stated. He looked them up and down, and once he was done, said, “Come in.”

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Sun Ce sat down as soon as he entered, while Zhou Yu went behind him, kneeling to his back, slightly left. He took the cup the serving girl handed him, brewing tea for Sun Ce.

Zhou Shang hadn't seen his nephew Zhou Yu for many years. The last time had been a hasty glance, four years ago, when he carried Zhou Yi's casket. Sun Ce had also been present that day, but seeing that Zhou Yu was Sun Ce's subordinate surprised him.

Even Sun Ce found it strange, but when he turned back to look, a single glance from Zhou Yu calmed him.

"I heard about what happened to your father a few days ago," Zhou Shang said, getting to the point. "A letter also came from Shu County. Before the new year, your uncle came by Danyang, and we had a small get-together. When the topic of you standing by and being patient came up, we all agreed it was not easy for you."

"Zhou-daren is praising me too highly," Sun Ce said sincerely, with a raise of his eyebrows. "My father passed, and all my ambitions have turned to dust. I simply wish to observe the proper three years of mourning for my father."

Zhou Shang let out a cold chuckle. "Zhou Yu being so anachronistic is one thing, but you joining him in being so old-fashioned? If, one day, I were to return to the west, I would never force my son to mourn me for three whole years."

Sun Ce smiled, abashed.

Zhou Shang continued, "Zhou Yu, how is your mother's health?"

"With your blessing, well."

The moment Zhou Yu had seen his uncle, his entire demeanor grew still and calm. Though there was still an air of youth about him, his speech and movements became very measured. It was only when he lifted the cup and handed it to Sun Ce that he showed a hint of nervousness.

He continued, "Mother and Lady Sun are staying together. Having a companion can help alleviate grief."

A civil official bowed and handed Zhou Shang a wooden box. He opened the lid with both hands and revealed a letter inside. Zhou Shang took the letter, placed it to one side, and spoke to Sun Ce.

“Sun Bofu, your father was the Tiger of Jiangdong, and his title was the Polu General. Though he perished on the battlefield and his body was buried on Mount Xian, as of today, his subordinates all turned their backs on you and returned to Shouchun. Do you not have any plans at all?”

“It was this nephew who sent them away,” Sun Ce explained. “Compared to staying in Shu County, it was better for them to find a new path as soon as they possibly could.”

Zhou Shang grunted. “And yourself?”

His words were like the edge of a knife, giving Sun Ce no room for ambivalence. They were not polite, and Sun Ce seemed to have learned his lesson. He didn’t dare look at Zhou Yu, instead studying Zhou Shang’s expression.

Sun Ce said earnestly, “If an opportunity appears, then I will make another attempt at rising.”

“How?” Zhou Shang asked coldly. “You have no troops and no money.”

“If Sun Jian could rise against all odds during the chaos between the heroes,” Sun Ce said, leaning forward slightly, “then I can as well. The paths left behind by my predecessors cannot be traveled again, and Gongjin taught me I must first learn to understand the situation at hand.”

“Ah well,” Zhou Shang said, “I have heard you are whimsical and flippant, but from what I see today, you seem steady. If you restrain your natural inclinations, it is within your ability to lead troops into battle.”

Zhou Yu was silent, focused on grinding tea leaves before soaking them in hot water and sifting out the shreds.

Zhou Shang glanced at him before continuing, “This is a letter of condolence delivered from Chang’an, which was originally supposed to be sent to you through me. However, because of the heavy snow and my busy schedule, I was delayed. Here, read it.”

Zhou Shang's subordinate handed the letter over. Zhou Yu put down the cup, took the envelope with both hands, pulled it out, and spread it open.

Sun Ce shot Zhou Yu a look, and Zhou Yu began to read. It was written by Lü Bu; he had already entered Chang'an with Dong Zhuo, and Dong Zhuo had taken the city and declared himself emperor. Lü Bu had heard about Sun Jian's death and was sending his condolences through this letter, in memory of Sun Jian.

As Zhou Yu read the beginning, Sun Ce understood its intent.

"I won't go to Chang'an," he declared.

"Why not?" Zhou Shang asked methodically as he drank his tea without concern.

"Those that walk different paths will not be able to make plans together."

Zhou Shang did not reply for some time.

One stick of incense's time passed before Zhou Shang said, "Every day that thief Dong is not ousted is one more day spent without peace."

"The thief Dong Zhuo must be removed," Sun Ce said in response, "but Yuan Shu of Shouchun is also watching with a wrathful gaze."

"That's right," Zhou Shang said, letting out a long breath. "Chaos abounds, and traitors rise all around. It is difficult." He shook his head.

Zhou Yu said, "We came to ask for your assistance."

"What can I even provide?" Zhou Shang asked in reply. "I'm already halfway in the ground."

"Prefect Zhou has governed Danyang for a long time," Sun Ce replied, "and whether the people are for or against you, you can tell in a single glance. To pacify Jiangdong, we require the assistance of the prefect, and we came here for it."

Zhou Shang paused for a moment, mid-sip, but he didn't look at Sun Ce. Zhou Yu's palms were clammy. He hadn't thought Sun Ce would get to the point so quickly and speak his true intentions.

“If I were to hand the Danyang militia over to you,” Zhou Shang said, “and you take them to war, would you be able to bring them back peacefully?”

Sun Ce didn’t reply.

“If Yuan Shu and his men were to ambush us in the coming days, could you protect all the citizens of my Danyang City?”

Sun Ce still didn’t speak.

“If I were to give Danyang over to you, would you treat all the people well?”

After a long silence, Sun Ce opened his mouth and spoke. “Prefect Zhou, destiny determines life and death, and the heavens determine success and failure. Living in a turbulent world is not easy, and Sun Ce cannot promise every single soldier will live. Sun Ce may not be able to protect the entire city’s worth of people, but if anyone wishes to forcefully take Danyang, Sun Ce can only vow he will live and die together with this land.”

Zhou Shang raised his head and narrowed his eyes, studying Sun Ce with a forceful gaze. Zhou Yu acted as if he didn’t hear anything. He set a pot of tea down on the table in front of Sun Ce.

Chapter 6:
Zhugong

"'LIVE AND DIE TOGETHER'?" Zhou Shang followed this question with a cold chuckle.

"Danyang is bountiful," Sun Ce replied, "but when the fires of war start burning the tens of thousands of acres of fertile land, including Jing Province, everyone will find it difficult to remain at peace through individual efforts. Prefect Zhou, Liu Biao's way will not work."

Sun Ce's words were too direct, clearly earning Zhou Shang's displeasure. Zhou Yu shot Sun Ce a glance, telling him not to let that didactic tone sneak into his voice. Sun Ce's return look conveyed that it was fine, and he patted the back of Zhou Yu's hand.

Zhou Shang spoke. "Your dad's personality tended toward rashness. Since the entirety of Jiangdong is involved, don't fault me for saying something unkind, Nephew. Being valiant is good, but it is too easy for bold people to be headstrong. The Changsha troops are incorporated into another army, and it will be very difficult for you to accomplish something noteworthy now."

"No matter how difficult, I must rise to the occasion. My dad would lose, but I will not. Every corner of Jiangdong is preparing to weather the storm," Sun Ce said. "Turbulence will soon spread everywhere. In this world, even if you don't pick a fight with anyone, inevitably others will seek to fight you. I ask that the lord prefect please reconsider."

Zhou Shang replied coldly, "Looks like Nephew Sun came to lecture this old man instead."

"I wouldn't dare, I wouldn't dare," Sun Ce hurriedly said. "It's just that recently, I received sudden inspiration."

"Whatever you say." Zhou Shang rose and left his seat, and Zhou Yu's heart thumped. "Keep drinking."

Zhou Shang slowly walked away.

“I told you, don’t speak out of turn!” Zhou Yu gritted his teeth in anger.

Sun Ce’s expression was one of confusion.

“I already…held back. Ah! Hey! Don’t!” Sun Ce hadn’t finished speaking when Zhou Yu grabbed his ear.

“Your last words were unnecessary and only added fuel to the flames. He had basically already agreed to hand the Danyang military over to you!”

Sun Ce slumped, head hanging, as Zhou Yu, full of rage, scolded him endlessly. A while later, the head servant of the prefect’s manor came, and Zhou Yu and Sun Ce immediately fell silent.

“The prefect requests Young Master Zhou’s presence in the back courtyard for a chat,” the head servant said, his eyes lowered.

Zhou Yu passed through the fine snow filling the air and found Zhou Shang standing in the back courtyard, a servant carrying a lantern behind.

He first bowed and greeted his father’s brother before standing primly and properly aside. Zhou Shang was harsh, severe, and picky about the rules of etiquette. Since he didn’t speak, Zhou Yu didn’t either.

A long while later, Zhou Shang exhaled a long sigh.

“Aside from Danyang, where else are you going?”

“Liyang.”

“Has Wu Jing already prepared for your arrival?”

“He has not,” Zhou Yu said, politely.

“After Sun Jian died, I thought his two sons would become better behaved,” Zhou Shang said darkly. Zhou Yu didn’t reply. Zhou Shang continued, “You think you two alone can beat Yuan Shu?”

Zhou Yu thought for a moment before replying, “We have Uncle and Prefect Wu Jing. Yuan Shu all but proclaimed himself emperor with the jade seal, so this is the perfect time to sway the hearts of the people. I imagine he will not act hastily to deal with this nephew.”

“What do you think of Sun Ce as a person?” Zhou Shang asked.

This time, Zhou Yu didn’t dare to respond rashly.

After a long while and some deep thought, he replied with ten words: “He is forthright and generous, valiant and adept at planning.”

“He shows promise as a commander, but it will be difficult to be one of his followers. Ah well. Since he has you at his side, then I’ll take this bet. He spoke well; as turbulent times come, no one will survive unscathed alone. I’m growing old. I’ll leave Danyang to you two.”

As these words settled into Zhou Yu, the burden he carried on his shoulders released.

“Tomorrow, this child will set off to Liyang.”

Zhou Shang nodded, so Zhou Yu bowed and took his leave. When he returned to the visiting room, Sun Ce was amusing himself. Zhou Yu walked into the room and swallowed the smile that stretched his face, lips straightening impassively.

Sun Ce raised his head, smiling like a big child.

“How did it go? Did it work?”

“It almost turned into a shitshow because of you!” Zhou Yu scolded him.

Sun Ce laughed loudly, rising and leaning against Zhou Yu.

That night, they didn’t stay within the manor, instead searching for a place to stay outside. The city at night was filled with lights from the houses, and Zhou Yu fetched some warm water to wash his face. With Danyang as their support, everything would be much easier.

The next day, Zhou Yu and Sun Ce walked around inside the city. They didn’t disturb Zhou Shang, instead observing the people and defense capabilities of the city guards. Zhou Yu estimated the money and rations they held, while Sun Ce asked after the strength of the army. When they arrived in the eastern section of the city, someone came from the prefect’s manor to hand over the military account books that listed their provisions; everything fell within Zhou Yu’s predictions.

Danyang would be their first stronghold, and in order not to butt heads with Zhou Shang, Zhou Yu bought an estate in the city where they could handle their daily affairs. The prefect and the two of them were

separate, and if Yuan Shu sent anyone asking around, it would seem they were independent.

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Fei Yu screeched as it came toward them, shooting through the new snow.

Zhou Yu was penning a notice, essentially a recruiting drive. His handwriting was bold and vigorous. Sun Ce stood in the courtyard for a long while with Fei Yu but didn't speak.

"Something wrong?" Zhou Yu asked.

"It's a letter from Lu Zijing," Sun Ce replied. "Chang'an sent it to Shu County, and Shu County transferred it to us."

"Let me see," Zhou Yu replied.

Sun Ce opened the letter and put it on the table before pulling out his seal and pressing it against the paper. On the seal were the words *Polu General Sun*.

Zhou Yu glanced over the letter and froze. This letter was a warrant Luoyang sent; the emperor bestowed the title of General Polu upon Sun Ce after Sun Jian's death. Which was to say, Sun Ce had officially inherited his father's position.

"We can start our own office now," Zhou Yu said. "This is great! But why would Dong Zhuo…"

Sun Ce pointed at the seal on the letter. It was the seal of the General of the Household, Lü Bu, as well as the emperor's seal. The imperial jade seal was still in Yuan Shu's hands, so those seals on the letter were the best Dong Zhuo could manage.

Sun Ce smiled as he spoke. "Now that he's bestowed this level of favor on us, we really can't go after Luoyang."

"If we can make sure this city survives, that'll be good enough," Zhou Yu said. "Should we fight for control of Luoyang, Lü Fengxian would be there guarding it. I would not dare disturb him."

That afternoon Zhou Yu gave Sun Ce a stack of notices, and the two of them split up to paste them across the city. Without any helpers, they had to do everything on their own. During the afternoon market hours, when the citizens saw the notices, the amount who came to enlist formed a whole line. Zhou Yu sat upright, asking each about their family situation.

“Are you General Sun’s soldiers?” someone asked.

Sun Ce sat, smiling jovially, listening to Zhou Yu organizing squads for him.

Zhou Yu raised his brush and wrote down a note, replying, “Yes.”

The man continued, “Long ago, when the prefect of Changsha passed through, he saved this lowly one’s family from falling into the murderous grasp of the Yellow Turban Army. Now my entire family, from young to old, wish to repay that debt.”

Sun Ce sighed. He rose to bow and was bowed to in reply.

“We often hear in Chang County that the prefect died to arrows, and my family told me to join the army to avenge the lord prefect,” he continued. “Whether we endure the wind and the rain or the fires of war, I will always listen to General Sun’s orders.”

Sun Ce’s eyes grew wet, and he nodded. “I will not let Dage down, since you have entrusted your life to me.”

Zhou Yu handed over the note telling those who remained to go to the prefect’s estate to retrieve their waist tallies, leather armor, and weapons.

When the sun set behind the western mountains, some four hundred people already gathered outside the estate, all of them coming because of Sun Ce’s reputation.

“The gates are closing!” Zhou Yu said. “Come back tomorrow.”

“Young Master Zhou!” someone said, cupping their hands in their sleeves. “For the brothers who aren’t in a rush, can you grant us a meal? We heard the news in the morning and came from the rural areas outside the city, but since the sky’s grown dark we can’t leave now.”

Zhou Yu went inside to get some money and handed it out to each of them, telling them to find a place to rest.

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Sun Ce practiced his staff moves in the courtyard while Zhou Yu sat in the hallway, writing and calculating.

Sun Ce said, “Four hundred is enough. Tomorrow I’ll bring them to Liyang. Don’t worry too much about our rations. When the time comes, we’ll still have to find my uncle and ask him to assign me some men to train the troops.”

“We’re not in a rush; we do not need to go tomorrow,” Zhou Yu replied. “It’ll take ten days to half a month to settle affairs here before we’ll be able to leave.”

“I’m afraid if we stay here too long, things might change.”

“What are you in a rush for?” Zhou Yu put down his pen, meeting Sun Ce’s gaze.

Sun Ce thought for a bit before replying, “I’m afraid if we dally here for two or three months, Liyang may be cornered by the Wu Commandery.”

“Is that so?” Zhou Yu asked. “Though the prefect of Wu Commandery, Xu Gong, has yet to announce his allegiances, he gets his rations from Yuan Shu. If you were to bring your four hundred new untrained troops to Liyang, are you not afraid Xu Gong would send a report to Yuan Shu and detain your troops in Liyang?”

“It won’t come to that,” Sun Ce said easily with a wave of his hand, moving to Zhou Yu’s side. “My uncle will hold out.”

“You’re anxious to set off because you want revenge, right?” Zhou Yu asked. “After you finish gathering your troops in Liyang, you’ll send a secret message along the way to Cheng Pu, Huang Gai, and the rest of the generals, instructing them to bring their men, so you can avenge your dad.”

Zhou Yu’s guess was spot-on—that was exactly Sun Ce’s train of thought.

“I can hide nothing from you,” Sun Ce replied.

“I saw you starting to write letters as soon as spring came.”

“Heading down to Jing Province requires us to have a navy,” Sun Ce pointed out. “Now that we do and our people have returned, what’s wrong with letting Cheng Pu bring the troops out from under Yuan Shu’s command?”

“Why don’t *you* tell me what’s wrong with that?” Zhou Yu replied. “I already intercepted the letter.”

“I was wondering why there was no response.”

Sun Ce rose and came to a stop in front of the courtyard. Small, densely packed snowflakes fell from the sky.

“Are you angry?” Zhou Yu asked.

Sun Ce didn’t make a sound.

“Did you not think it through?” Zhou Yu asked. “If you steal Yuan Shu’s troops to get revenge, you will have it, but will Yuan Shu let us go after we return from Jing Province? That bastard is a master of holding grudges, and when he decides to act, both attacking and retreating will be difficult. He will never allow you to remain in Danyang…”

“If we gain Jing Province, do we need to return to Danyang?”

“You think Jing Province is so easy to govern?” Zhou Yu tossed his brush aside, his anger mounting. “Think these trivial things through clearly.” He frowned. “Jing Province is full of martial families. If we can’t even take care of Jiangdong and a group of us outsiders enter Jing Province, there is no way we will have an easy time.”

Sun Ce didn’t reply directly. “I want revenge.”

“My dad died at the hands of Hua Xiong, but Hua Xiong has since passed. Where should I seek revenge for my father?”

“That is why,” Sun Ce said, turning his head to give Zhou Yu a glance, “you must kill your enemies with your own blade. As soon as possible.”

“Are your enemies more important, or is the grand scheme of things more important?” Zhou Yu asked, holding his temper back.

Originally, Zhou Yu hadn’t wanted to confront Sun Ce with these words. After all, it was not yet three years since Sun Jian departed the

world. He'd thought Sun Ce had managed to move on—not that he'd been consumed by revenge fantasies. This was definitely not his original intention. Sun Ce never said a single thing about it, but, in this half year since last midsummer, he had never let it go at all.

Sun Ce left. Zhou Yu sat alone, staring at the dim light of the lamp, lost in his thoughts.

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During the night, the snow stopped, and the eaves began to drip with water.

Zhou Yu knocked on the door to Sun Ce's room. A call of "Come in" sounded from inside, yet Zhou Yu didn't enter.

"I know the main goal is important." Sun Ce's shadow moved back and forth inside as he smiled. "But Gongjin, think about it. If I don't get revenge, how will I stand firm in Jiangdong?"

"Only by enduring temporary hardship can you accomplish great things. Even Han Xin[32] endured humiliation between another's legs. I'm not telling you to endure for your entire life. Just a few years."

"Gongjin, come in," Sun Ce said. "Come in and talk."

"Whatever," Zhou Yu replied. "You're the Zhugong; you're the one with the ideas."

"That's right," Sun Ce said. "I had an idea, and to tell you the truth, I knew as soon as I brought it up, you'd get angry, so I didn't dare say it."

Could "angry" adequately describe Zhou Yu's feelings? He was burning with so much violent rage, he wanted to beat Sun Ce up. Finally, he couldn't hold it back.

"Why are you so eager to get revenge?!"

"I'm not just doing it for revenge!"

Sun Ce pushed the door open and walked forward.

“Think about it, just think about it! My dad died to Huang Zu’s arrows; if I don’t get revenge, how will I gather an army? How will I build up my own authority?! You saw today the people we recruited all came because of debts of gratitude they owed my father. Do they even know who I am?

“You said you owe Hua Xiong a debt of blood as well, but that’s different!” Sun Ce said. “You are not leading the troops; you are not relying on the resources of a single city to gain independence. If I was assisting you instead, I would say what you’ve said. I have no accomplishments, no trade to follow, and no reputation. I only have this single title, son of the prefect of Changsha.

“Aside from that,” Sun Ce continued, disheartened, “no one recognizes me, and no one knows of me. Even the troops supposedly under my command—Cheng Pu, Huang Gai, Zhu Zhi—none truly pledged to *me*.”

Zhou Yu sucked in a deep breath, seeing Sun Ce’s half-packed belongings behind him.

“If you attack Jing Province—putting aside if you’ll be able to conquer it or not,” Zhou Yu said, “do you have enough troops, and what is your plan after you conquer it? Jing Province is historically a land of contention between military families. As soon as you send your troops, the forces on all sides will immediately grow wary. You are not mature enough, and to take such an action at such a time is exceedingly foolish.”

“This is the first step in the plan,” Sun Ce replied. “You are not to ask about this anymore, because from now on, I am in charge of external affairs. You’re in charge of internal affairs. You’ll be in charge of the home front, while I’ll be in charge of the front lines…”

These words left Zhou Yu livid.

He roared, “Sun Bofu!”

“I’ve thought it all through!” Sun Ce yelled back. “I thought about this the entire winter! If I want to make a comeback, this step must be taken!”

They were silent for a moment, and Zhou Yu looked at the clothes that were rolled up, ready to be packed, on the bed.

“As you wish,” Zhou Yu said.

Sun Ce sighed. Zhou Yu slammed the door and left.

“Every time, it’s always me listening to you,” Sun Ce said, opening it and standing in the corridor. “Can’t you listen to me for once? There is nothing more important than avenging my father…”

Zhou Yu turned the corner and disappeared.

Sun Ce was so crushed he stopped packing, choosing instead to lie down, fully clothed, on the bed. His eyes wouldn’t close, and he stared at the ceiling for a long while, only managing to fall asleep late into the night.

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The next morning, Zhou Yu kicked the door open.

Sun Ce was startled awake. His head split with pain. “What time is it?”

Zhou Yu came to pack his belongings for him. Ever since they started their journey together, Zhou Yu arranged Sun Ce’s clothes, food, lodgings, and travels. After Zhou Yu left, Sun Ce couldn’t even find where he put his most commonly used objects. Zhou Yu was quicker than him and finished packing like a whirlwind.

“Gongjin, listen to me,” Sun Ce said.

“I’m done,” Zhou Yu said. “Everything is packed. You have three days’ worth of clothes, and I’ve prepared dried rations for you as well. Don’t catch a cold. There’s medicine in the backpack. You can stew it yourself…”

Zhou Yu dragged Sun Ce up by the armpits, pulling him to his feet.

“Get up, get up.”

Sun Ce wasn’t fully awake. Zhou Yu placed a large bundle wrapped in a bedsheet on Sun Ce’s back, tightened it around his waist and shoulder, and tied a knot in front of his chest.

Sun Ce could only boggle as Zhou Yu nudged him once more.

“Go, set off.”

With that, Zhou Yu walked out of the room.

Sun Ce replied, “You’re screwing with me!”

Zhou Yu didn’t respond, as he’d simply vanished. Sun Ce wanted to search for him but couldn’t find him, so he assumed Zhou Yu went to the prefect’s manor. The main gates were closed, and though Sun Ce wanted to wait, he didn’t have enough time; he was not willing to put off his departure for another day. He sat for a while in the courtyard, resembling a turtle with a huge shell. He glanced in the mirror; he looked like a fool.

In the end, he left Zhou Yu a letter, saddled his horse, and set off.

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There were several times Sun Ce wanted to turn around. He felt like Zhou Yu didn’t really want to let him leave. Leaving after their argument also left a feeling of trepidation in his heart. He wanted to go back but also didn’t, so with every step he took, he looked back three times.

He had only traveled twenty miles by noon.

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It was a snowy day, and the roads were slippery. In the end, Sun Ce made up his mind. *Whatever. After I get back, I’ll apologize to Zhou Yu, but first, I need to get to Liyang.*

After another five miles, he saw a large, dark mass of people before him, numbering over a thousand.

Zhou Yu was leading these troops along the road, all waiting on Sun Ce who carried a bag on his back like he was fleeing. He grinned.

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For the rest of the journey, Zhou Yu's expression remained stormy. Sun Ce poked at him a few times, but Zhou Yu didn't even want to talk.

"Say," Sun Ce said, smiling, "stop being angry, all right? You're already here."

Zhou Yu replied stoically, "I am not agreeing to your plan, but the greater good is important. I had no choice but to lead the troops out to prevent you from encountering any danger on the road. Yuan Shu is definitely watching us now."

"Okay, okay," Sun Ce said. "You're the most important of us all. Whatever you say goes."

They passed by a few county capitals on their way from Danyang to Liyang, and every time Sun Ce arrived, people would enlist. The news spread from one ear to ten, ten to a hundred, and ten days later, they had already acquired over three thousand men.

But they were a motley group. Aside from the Danyang troops Zhou Yu brought, many were completely unseasoned. Their marching speed slowed, and their journey dragged on. It took them five days to reach Liyang. When they arrived, without wasting a single breath, Sun Ce began to treat the place as if it were his territory. He entered the city and first found the captain of the city guard, figured out lodgings for his troops, and walked into the prefect's estate with great familiarity.

The prefect of Liyang, Wu Jing, had a temperament akin to Sun Ce's; they seemed to be formed from the same mold. When he saw the two of them, he began to laugh a loud belly laugh. He didn't say anything, instead taking Zhou Yu's hand as if they were old friends who hadn't seen each other for a decade.

Wu Jing's spirit forced Zhou Yu to temporarily set aside his anger toward Sun Ce. Those who witnessed his smile felt bathed in a spring breeze, and Zhou Yu greeted the prefect of Liyang with a bow.

"No problem! No problem!" Wu Jing said. "Your dad, ah, that man's temper was very short. When I offered troops to help him, he actually felt I was sticking my nose where it didn't belong."

“That’s right, that’s right.” Sun Ce hurriedly nodded.

Zhou Yu could tell Wu Jing and Sun Jian had not seen eye to eye when Sun Jian was still alive, but that was often the case between a man and his brother-in-law. Zhou Yu had also heard Sun Quan tell a few anecdotes about his parents and learned that Sun Jian had actually carried the Lady of Wu off to marry her.

If it were Zhou Yu whose sister was stolen away to be married without warning by a man with a fiery temper, he would also not have anything nice to say to him.

Thankfully the nephew was like the uncle, and Sun Ce got along well with his mother’s side of the family.

“What are you planning to do after this?” Wu Jing asked. “Have you gathered these men to seek revenge for your father? What else are you planning?”

Zhou Yu replied, “For our current plans, we need to gather troops and buy supplies, as increasing our forces is key.”

“After that, naturally, we’ll be conquering Jing Province,” Sun Ce said.

Zhou Yu’s expression shifted. Knowing how determined Sun Ce was, he said to Wu Jing, “Liyang has remained at peace for ten years and has been coveted by Yuan Shu just as long. Though this place has well-trained troops and ready weapons, if they were all mobilized to Jing Province, their rear would be left unguarded and open to surprise. Please, think this over.”

“That’s true, that’s true,” Wu Jing said. “Nephew Zhou’s words make sense.”

“The Danyang troops can rush to assist,” Sun Ce replied, “and our two cities can take care of each other.”

Zhou Yu replied unhappily, “How can you toy with the lives of the forty thousand members of the Wu Commandery with Xu Gong watching it like a hawk?”

“It’s not like Xu Gong is fighting for Yuan Shu,” Sun Ce replied sternly. “Zhou Gongjin, don’t overthink it. Uncle, see, Zhou Yu’s—”

“When I went to Shouchun, Xu Gong was sitting right at Yuan Shu’s side! Tell me, does he fight for Yuan Shu or not?!” Zhou Yu said.

“You’re arguing with me in front of my uncle? You think you know better than me, is that it?!” Sun Ce yelled.

“Don’t fight, don’t fight,” Wu Jing said, hurrying to mediate. “What Ce-er said also makes sense…”

“They’re your men,” Zhou Yu said. “You should be the one coming up with ideas. What am I worrying for?”

“Ay,” Wu Jing said, chuckling.

“Hey, that’s too far…” Sun Ce protested.

Zhou Yu didn’t speak. He simply drank his tea, and Sun Ce lifted the pot, pouring him more while he smiled.

Wu Jing thought for a bit.

“Why don’t we try this? Since Xu Gong is an unknown variable, and my troops are lazing about anyway, why don’t you two make another trip and take the troops to the Wu Commandery?”

Zhou Yu was silent while Wu Jing explained, “Originally, this old bag of bones wanted to let things lie, but the year before, a group of bandits brought disaster to the people. There was a bandit leader over in Wucheng County named Yan Baihu, and despite us petitioning the imperial court multiple times for troops to quash them, that bastard hid himself under Xu Gong’s command…”

Sun Ce made the final decision.

“Your suggestion has merit. Let’s first take down Xu Gong, then gather the troops of Wu Commandery.”

Wu Jing said happily, “One of your father’s old subordinates, Zhu Zhi, is in Wu Commandery. He holds the position of marshal. Let’s conquer from both the inside and out—how does that sound?”

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The first rain of spring fell in Liyang as Zhou Yu walked swiftly across the courtyard, Sun Ce racing behind him.

“Hey.” Sun Ce circled around from behind a pillar.

Zhou Yu didn’t pay him any attention.

Sun Ce said, “Stop right there!”

No longer able to bear it, Zhou Yu sighed. “I’m leaving.”

“Where are you going?”

“Back to where I came from.”

“Let’s leave this aside from now on, as you wished.”

Zhou Yu didn’t say anything. He sidestepped Sun Ce, moving to leave, but Sun Ce blocked his path.

“Can’t you let me save face in front of my own uncle?”

“For every day you stay at my side,” Zhou Yu said, “I’ll whittle away one day’s worth of reputation from you. Chipping your prestige is one thing; I’ll also trip you up underhandedly. If you want to send troops to Jing Province, no matter how many reasons you give, if you can’t persuade me, it’ll all have been in vain.”

“You…”

Zhou Yu continued intently, “If I don’t agree, you will never receive the rations you’re waiting for, so there’s no use in sending your troops out anyway.”

Sun Ce stood for a while, before his entire body seemed to droop, as if he had admitted defeat.

“All right,” Sun Ce said. “You win.”

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That day, Zhou Yu took control of the military account books for Liyang. There were six thousand troops there, and with the addition of the three thousand men he and Sun Ce had brought, they numbered nine

thousand. Along with the navy in Shu County, they were twelve thousand in total.

Twelve thousand was enough to challenge Yuan Shu, and if they were used correctly, conquering Jing Province was not impossible. Sun Ce had personal reasons for proposing such a plan, but Zhou Yu had other considerations. What would they do after conquering Jing Province?

Revenge was easy—it would be over as soon as they finished their killing. But after that, the entire world would grow uneasy as the current, precarious balance was disrupted. Sun Ce would replace Yuan Shu as the biggest threat. When that time came, Yuan Shao, Yuan Shu, Dong Zhuo, and Gongsun Zan… All of them would immediately take action to eliminate him.

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"Do we still need to fight for Wu Commandery?" Sun Ce said, glancing at the books. "With nine thousand men slaughtering their way over and less than three thousand guarding the city, plus Zhu Zhi helping from the inside, we'll flatten it no matter what."

"It's not a question of if we'll be able to conquer it," Zhou Yu said, after thinking for a bit. "How will you enter the city? Will you have someone shouting to make way in the front, your men guarding you from the back, with everyone watching as you take the Wu Commandery with the divine right to rule on your side? Or will you let Xu Gong close the city gates and look death calmly in the eye as you exchange a few rounds of arrows, before he wails, 'I have done my duty faithfully! But the entire city will fall to the hands of a thief,' and incentivizes the citizens to treat you as a robber as you enter?"

Sun Ce burst out into laughter.

Zhou Yu continued, "Do as you see fit."

Amused, Sun Ce went over and looked at the maps on Zhou Yu's table.

He said, “Didn’t my uncle say it? Yan Baihu has reigned undisturbed for many years, yet both the heavens and the people are angry at his rule. Let Xu Gong hand him over first, and if Xu Gong doesn’t do that, then we kill our way in.”

“What if Xu Gong does hand him over?” Zhou Yu asked.

Sun Ce had no response.

Zhou Yu continued, “If you wish to establish your reputation and build your prestige, this is the best chance. Do not allow a single soldier to be wounded. Sweep over like a storm and take Wu Commandery. Spare Yan Baihu’s life, and make them fight to the death *for* you. This is more useful than fighting your way into Jing Province and hanging Huang Zu’s head on the city wall.”

Sun Ce was silent for a long while before he replied, “You speak rightly, but I cannot do that.”

Zhou Yu tossed the brush away.

“Try. Aren’t you in charge of external affairs? This method is more difficult than any of our previous battles. If you wish to become famous from a single battle, you must win it elegantly.”

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Three days later, Zhou Yu secretly led his troops forth while Sun Ce organized the army and followed behind, heading toward Wu Commandery.

The prefect of Liyang, Wu Jing, first sent out a secret edict from the imperial court, informing Xu Gong that, in these tumultuous times, it was hard for the court to enforce its decrees. Influence overlapped between the court and the counties, and often they seemed to comply but acted contrary to their words. As the prefect of Liyang, Wu Jing was tasked with capturing the traitor Yan Baihu who resided within his lands. Since Yan Baihu escaped to Wu Commandery and hid himself in Xu Gong’s territory, Xu Gong was disobeying direct orders.

Wu Jing issued an arrest warrant, with the implication he was willing to apply diplomacy first, but naturally, Xu Gong would ignore it. Wu Jing

subsequently sent out Sun Ce under the pretense of catching the thieves as an excuse for waging war and sending troops to pressure Wu Commandery.

Just as Zhou Yu expected, Xu Gong adamantly refused, insisting on his ignorance. On the ninth of the second month, Sun Ce led his troops to press in on Wu Commandery. Xu Gong was well aware of that development, as the cities and towns along the way had watched Sun Ce pass. Zhou Yu had long since set down a strict order that as long as they were not in their own territory, the troops must not disturb the residents.

That said, thanks in part to Sun Jian's reputation, many residents of Wu Commandery, sick of Yan Baihu's harsh rule, joined the ranks of Sun Ce's army along the way, committed to routing the thief. Sun Ce's name was influential, and when they arrived outside the Wu Commandery, they numbered over ten thousand. It was a grand sight. With that army at his back, Sun Ce looked unbeatable.

Seven thousand soldiers were assigned to Wu Commandery, who were further split among Wucheng, Qiantang, Yuhang, Fuchun, and the surrounding regions. Xu Gong lived within the Wu County capital, with less than three thousand men stationed there. When they arrived, the soldiers guarding the city were wary of the slightest sound, and the gates were tightly shut.

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It was spring in Jiangdong, and the blossoms were in bloom. The fields surrounding Wu Commandery were brimming with wildflowers when Sun Ce led his army to set up camp outside the city. The warm wind settled a laziness over them.

"Is anyone home? Tell Xu Gong to come out and speak!" Sun Ce shouted from a distance, reining his horse to a stop in the middle of the field.

There were over ten thousand citizens in Wu County, and the people in the city were restless and uneasy.

Sun Ce shouted again, “Is Prefect Xu there? This general has something to ask of him!”

Over the city walls, a person appeared, evidently there to shout Xu Gong’s reply.

The entire city prepared to face a great enemy, and the archers all nocked arrows to their bows. Sun Ce, however, did not show a hint of fear as he swaggered back and forth in front of the city gates, a staff of divine metal slung on his back.

“I heard Yan Baihu is hiding in your city,” Sun Ce said. “I was sent by the imperial court to arrest him and settle the case.”

Sun Ce shook open the letter in his hand, stamped with General Polu Sun’s seal. A subordinate took the message to the city gates, but Xu Gong refused to open them, instead replying politely from up top, “General Sun must be joking. No such thing happened, and Yan Baihu was chased out of Wu Commandery long ago.”

Sun Ce replied, “Is that right? Why did I hear he’s been here recently?”

Xu Gong didn’t speak. A moment later, he exchanged a few words of discussion with his subordinates.

“General Sun, please return to where you came from.”

Sun Ce said, “Ah well. If my lord prefect does not believe me, my troops will make camp outside the city. If any changes happen within, we can respond in a timely fashion.”

Xu Gong’s face twitched.

“We won’t disturb any of the people or livestock living here,” Sun Ce continued, “so Prefect Xu is welcome to do as you please.”

Zhou Yu had long since planned for all of this. Sun Ce made camp outside the capital city, while Zhou Yu led some hundreds of men to the Wu River. They each sucked in a deep breath and sank into the water.

The western edge of the city bordered Lake Tai, and waterways crisscrossed the city. Since it was early spring, an iciness lingered within the water. When Sun Ce’s large force arrived, all four of the city’s gates were tightly shut. The only route in was through the water, and like a school

of fish a few hundred strong, they swam through the waterways to sneak into the city. As night fell, Zhou Yu climbed onto the banks of the river with a splash, his clothes soaking wet.

The night air was crisp, and Zhou Yu was so cold that his lips were purply green. His heart had twisted itself up in knots, and he could barely catch his breath. He thought, *I've been neglecting practicing my martial arts for these past few years. If it wasn't for the soldiers, I would have come close to drowning.*

That night the city was dead silent. Zhou Yu shivered as he issued his orders.

"Everyone, do as we discussed beforehand."

The soldiers nodded, dispersing through the main streets and small alleyways.

Zhou Yu's clothes were on the verge of freezing, and his long robes hung stiffly off his body. He sucked in a deep breath, stumbling his way through the main street enveloped in the dark of night, using all his might to leap onto a roof. He ran all the way to the northern side of the city, accompanied by the sound of ice shards clinking together.

The governor's manor was still lit with lamps. Zhou Yu perched up against the eaves, listening to the chatter from inside. He quietly picked up a roof tile upon seeing Xu Gong standing in the study, along with Zhu Zhi and a burly man with a curly beard whom Zhou Yu hadn't seen before.

"Sun Ce is similar to his father," Zhu Zhi said. "He is headstrong and willful, he acts before he thinks, and he does not consider his words before speaking. He's too young."

Xu Gong replied, "If the governor were to present yourself outside the city, what are our chances of victory?"

Zhu Zhi let out a breath. "It's hard to say. If he believes firmly in one thing, even if Sun Ce were to smash his head open against it, he would still guard it with his life. I am unable to persuade him to stop."

The curly-bearded fellow and Xu Gong exchanged a glance.

He added, "How about we write a missive and deliver it to the General of the Rear, Yuan Shu-daren?"

The bushy-bearded fellow came forward and knelt.

“Xu-daren!”

Xu Gong and Zhu Zhi hurried forward. “Quick, please rise.”

“Yan-xiong, please rise,” Zhu Zhi added.

“Eleven years have passed since I established a stronghold and gathered troops,” the curly-bearded man said. “Back then, the Yellow Turbans were wreaking havoc, leaving the citizens with no way to survive. I expelled the Yellow Turbans, and the lords of Wu Commandery saw that with their own eyes.”

“Of course, of course,” Xu Gong said, wiping away some sweat. “As long as Xu-mou guards Wu Commandery, nothing will happen to Yan-xiong. Please, relax.”

Zhou Yu watched this exchange in silence.

The third person had to be Yan Baihu. The capital of Wu County was shut away from outsiders because Xu Gong knew if Sun Ce wanted to force his way into the city, Xu Gong’s men would not be enough to oppose them. Today he had taken advantage of Sun Ce sending his troops out without a suitable reason, and as soon as night fell, he had hurried over to find Zhu Zhi for a discussion.

Xu Gong was almost fifty, and his figure was growing stout. He grew anxious after standing for so long, and though the air was brisk, he was covered in sweat. After a long discussion, they couldn’t come up with a strategy, so he and Yan Baihu took their leave.

Zhu Zhi paced within the study, but upon hearing three quiet knocks against the window, he moved to latch the main door without even turning his head. When he did glance around, Zhou Yu, covered in ice, was sitting in front of the table, his breath white from the cold.

“General Zhu.” Zhou Yu greeted Zhu Zhi with a bow.

Zhu Zhi hurried to lift him up. “I guessed a messenger would come tonight, but I did not expect it would be you.”

Zhu Zhi, Huang Gai, and the other generals had sworn allegiance to Sun Jian long ago. They were all Sun Ce’s seniors, so Zhou Yu didn’t dare offend him.

“I could not rest easily if anyone else came, so I could only make the trip myself.” He changed topic. “General Zhu, do you think now is the time?”

Zhou Yu didn’t probe Zhu Zhi, nor did he say anything like “If Sun Ce was just outside the city, would you follow him now or not?” For one, if Zhu Zhi already intended to leave and Zhou Yu rashly asked for his assistance, it would be easy for him to impede their progress if Zhu Zhi was hesitant about what to do next. Secondly, if Zhu Zhi remained steadfast, loyally waiting all this time for Sun Ce to send a message, it would be rude to confront him with a test.

Zhu Zhi began to chuckle in response to his question.

“After I bade farewell to the young general on Mount Gu near Lake Chao,” Zhu Zhi said, “Yuan Shu sent me to Wu County. Everyone generally agrees. I knew you were on the roof looking in, so some words I spoke were to continue deceiving Xu Gong. Do not take them to heart.”

A great burden fell from Zhou Yu’s shoulders.

“Since that’s the case, then may I trouble General Zhu to lend me a set of night-travel clothes,” Zhou Yu said, wrinkling his brows. A layer of frost crowned his hair. “There are a few trivial matters which need to be urgently dealt with.”

Zhu Zhi personally retrieved a set of night-travel clothes for Zhou Yu, while Zhou Yu inspected the map of Wu County pasted on the wall. After Zhu Zhi returned, Zhou Yu didn’t hide, changing right in the study into a set of black soldier’s robes, a blow dart gun in his hand.

“Were you the only person to come into the city?” Zhu Zhi asked him.

“Four hundred and twenty-one people accompanied me,” Zhou Yu said. “They’ve hidden themselves throughout the city, and I’ll trouble you, General, to arrange lodgings for them.”

“Settling them among my own men will do,” Zhi Zhu replied. “When you return, I’ll procure waist tallies for you to distribute.”

Zhou Yu nodded and vaulted from the same window he’d entered, blending into the dark night. A light rain started to fall, and though the

city’s defenses were up, Zhou Yu could not be stopped. Fei Yu flapped arduously down from the sky, landing on his arm.

“Shh.” Zhou Yu stroked Fei Yu gently, clambering up onto the top of the roof with it clutching his fist. He found the prefect’s manor based on memory alone.

As expected, the eastern side of the western wing was alight with lamps. That would be the study, and Xu Gong was most likely there, penning a letter.

Zhou Yu was just about to take a step when a wariness struck him. He sensed everything around him rustling slightly in the light rain. There were a number of hidden sentries stationed outside the prefect’s manor, experts in complete silence. Zhou Yu hesitated for a while before deciding he didn’t dare act rashly.

He waited, very patiently, for a whole hour. Finally, one person left the backyard and galloped away on a horse, and Zhou Yu leaped across the rooftops to tail him. This was Xu Gong’s messenger, who headed along the western main road out of the city.

Zhou Yu untied the strip of cloth and let Fei Yu go. The white falcon sliced through the pitch-black night, shooting toward the west, into the forest outside the city.

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Sun Ce also wore a set of night-travel clothes and led dozens of men standing guard within the forest west of the city. Fei Yu sped over, landing on Sun Ce’s shoulder. Sun Ce pursed his lips and whistled gently a few times, and the white falcon rose into the air again as the group passed silently through the grove.

The messenger’s steed rushed into the secret road through the forest. As the ambushers’ tripwire shot up, the man and horse careened forward, sprawling to the ground. Sun Ce’s soldiers rushed in, blades falling together in the quiet of the night. They hacked down the messenger where he lay before swiftly dragging his body into the depths of the grove.

“General Sun!”

One of his subordinates ran over holding a torch, shining its light upon Sun Ce. His forehead furrowed deeply as he hastily glanced over the letter they’d intercepted.

Xu Gong had penned a message to Yuan Shu, and its contents, unsurprisingly, requested Yuan Shu send troops to aid them or send a messenger with orders to dispatch Sun Ce away—otherwise, it was likely Sun Ce would attack.

Sun Ce laughed coldly. He finished reading the letter and sealed it before tying it to Fei Yu’s leg and sending the falcon back into the city.

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From the moment Fei Yu launched into the sky, less time passed than it took to brew a pot of tea before Zhou Yu appeared once more in front of Zhu Zhi.

Zhu Zhi produced his collected waist tallies.

“Come with me.”

Mounting a horse, Zhou Yu followed Zhu Zhi, passing through the main street in the silent night. They arrived at the governor’s men’s barracks in the east of the city.

“The guards in Xu Gong’s manor are highly skilled,” Zhou Yu said, “and he stationed hidden sentries on all sides. I didn’t dare sneak in without thought.”

Zhu Zhi replied in a quiet voice, “Xu Gong’s wife is from the Jianghu, and she has a good number of retainers under her command. Gongjin, I have something to discuss with you, and you must take these words to heart.”

Zhou Yu nodded, dismounting outside the barracks. He retrieved the sky lantern Zhu Zhi prepared for him, lighting it up with a wave of a match.

“Though Yan Baihu is a bandit,” Zhu Zhi said, “at the heart of it, he is also a local hero.”

“I understand.”

Zhou Yu nodded, the lamp casting its light over his handsome features. With his black outfit and the sky lantern in his hand, Zhou Yu drew quite a few sidelong glances from the soldiers in the barracks.

“If it’s possible, we will do our best not to kill him,” Zhou Yu said. “But before the city falls, we may need to lure Yan-xiong into our trap at least once. I can, however, promise his life will not be in danger.”

Zhu Zhi nodded. Zhou Yu loosened his grip and let the sky lantern go.

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A single dim sky lantern wobbled as it flew through the light rain toward the horizon of the dark sky.

The assassins hidden throughout the city raised their heads and looked toward it, coming from all sides to gather by Zhou Yu. Fei Yu spread its wings once more and glided down, bringing with it Xu Gong’s letter.

It felt like a lifetime had passed since Zhu Zhi last saw Fei Yu, and he was filled with emotion as he reached a hand out to stroke its feathers. Fei Yu still remembered him, and it tilted its head, affectionately rubbing against his finger. Zhou Yu took the letter before returning to the barracks with Zhu Zhi. Zhou Yu opened up the letter, glanced quickly over it, and then lifted his brush to dip it in some ink.

“General Zhu, General Huang, General Cheng Pu…after you all left,” Zhou Yu said solemnly, spreading a piece of paper out, “Bofu spent his days as if his spirit left his body, stumbling about in a daze, and his sole wish has been to return to Jing Province to avenge the old general.”

“Who among us does not wish to seek revenge?” Zhu Zhi said. “If we can successfully gain Wu Commandery today and set down roots here, I imagine Wentai-xiong’s spirit up in the heavens will rest a little easier.” Zhou Yu sighed, and Zhu Zhi continued, “After Wentai-xiong died on the battlefield, us brothers have wandered like wild dogs without a home. Now,

you have come, and so has Bofu, which is among the luckiest encounters in my life.”

As they spoke, Zhou Yu used Xu Gong’s written characters as a guide to write a new letter.

Zhu Zhi smiled as he watched. “With you to complement Bofu, what can stop you both?”

“My dad would scold me for a mischievous trick like this…”

Zhou Yu rewrote the letter in Xu Gong’s handwriting, keeping most of the original phrasing. Only at the end did he add the matter of Yan Baihu, and he mentioned that soon he would capture Yan Baihu and send him out of the city, handing him over to Sun Ce.

“I originally expected to find General Zhu and request a sample of Xu Gong’s handwriting, but instead it provided itself.”

Zhou Yu borrowed the light of the lamp to study Xu Gong’s personal seal and the imprint of the prefect’s signet. Every prefect’s official seal was almost the same, and only the personal seal would need to be carefully copied. He chopped off a length of wood, pulled out his seal-crafting chisel, and under the dim yellow light of the lamp, he began to forge the seal.

Zhu Zhi prepared the wax. After quickly carving the seal, Zhou Yu pressed it upright against the paper and then folded up the letter. Using the wax, Zhu Zhi sealed it before placing a corner of the letter in some water and allowing it to soften, opening it up just a little.

“This is to be sent to Yan Baihu, correct?”

Zhou Yu nodded. “I imagine General Zhu knows what to say.”

“I will simply say my men intercepted this messenger who was heading out of the city,” Zhu Zhi said. “Upon seeing the letter, they knew this was no trivial matter, so they hurried here to notify me.”

“Exactly.”

Zhou Yu flicked his sleeve, turning the Chijun Sword sideways and pulling it gently over his forearm, letting a bit of blood splatter on the letter. He then rose.

“We’ll also need to send someone to notify Xu Gong.”

“I will take care of that,” Zhu Zhi replied.

After the two of them finished arranging their next steps, they split up to do their parts, sinking into the dark night.

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An hour or two after midnight, in the cold, dark night, Zhu Zhi knocked on the entrance to Yan Baihu’s current residence. He was living in a small, four-sectioned courtyard outside of the prefect’s manor. Zhu Zhi coughed, and a servant rushed over, carrying a lantern.

“Get your family’s laoye,” Zhu Zhi said. “Tell him to come out right now.”

That servant had served Yan Baihu for many years and possessed a discerning gaze. Though Zhu Zhi wore the robes of a commoner, he was obviously a major figure. Not daring to slight him, the servant went back and roused Yan Baihu.

Yan Baihu stepped into the corridor, wrapped only in his inner robes. Evidently, he hadn’t slept all night either. Zhu Zhi handed the letter over and walked into the courtyard.

Yan Baihu didn’t make a sound. After opening the letter and glancing at it, he was taken aback and stared at Zhu Zhi.

“After you read it thoroughly, burn it,” Zhu Zhi said.

“Where is the messenger?” Yan Baihu asked.

“I already killed him and sank his corpse into Lake Tai.”

Yan Baihu paced back and forth several times in the corridor, shaking uncontrollably. Zhu Zhi nodded slightly, and just as he was about to bid Yan Baihu farewell, Yan Baihu’s knees trembled beneath him.

He folded to the ground and pleaded, “Governor-daren, please save me!”

Almost all of Yan Baihu’s family, from old to young, had sought refuge with Xu Gong. Xu Gong searched far and wide for retainers, which all of Jiangdong knew, and in this moment, if the prefect had his heart set

on exchanging him for peace in this region, it would not matter who begged for mercy on his behalf.

Zhu Zhi sighed. “To resolve this, Yan-xiong must take a trip out of the city tonight. This can be delayed no longer. Sun Ce’s troops are stationed outside the southern gates, so the better option would be for you to escape through the western gates.”

The night watchman sounded the hour as he passed by the door to the prefect’s manor.

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Zhou Yu nodded at Zhu Zhi’s subordinate.

Xu Gong was also disturbed for a good portion of the night, and he’d only just managed to put his heavy head down onto the pillows when one of his concubines had roused him to his feet again. He sat down at the front of the hall, lighting a dim lamp.

“Yan Baihu packed his belongings in the night and took his entire family with him,” the messenger said. “He may be trying to escape during the night.”

Xu Gong balked, and he ordered someone to investigate. Not long after, the retainer arrived.

“Reporting in to my lord! Yan Baihu is already preparing a carriage and gathering his subordinates within the city. He is truly planning to leave.”

“This idiot!” Xu Gong raged. “What about Zhu Zhi? Send a letter to Zhu Zhi immediately! Have him bring men to the city gates to stand guard! Send an order to heavily guard the city gates! Do not allow him to take even a single step out of this city without my say.”

“If he’s going, let him go,” Madame Xu said lazily. “Isn’t this the perfect chance to let Sun Ce chase after him?”

“Ay!” Xu Gong exclaimed anxiously. “How far can Yan Baihu truly run? If Sun Ce manages to capture him outside the city, how will that

bastard show any restraint? He'll find any excuse and charge into the city to search for the remnants! If this reaches the ears of General Yuan and he declares I'm harboring a nest of bandits, Wu County will end up falling into his hands!"

Xu Gong rose and ordered his servants to prepare a carriage. He changed his robes, brought along the assassins under his command, and prepared to head out in person to stop Yan Baihu.

When they left the prefect's manor, Zhou Yu, concealed in the back courtyard, performed some silent calculations. Quite a few people had left, so their defenses were whittled down to basically nothing. This was the best time to spring a surprise attack.

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Fei Yu flew to Sun Ce, where he stood outside the western city gates. The rhythm of his breaths trembled, his forehead covered in anxious sweat.

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A group of Zhou Yu's subordinates surrounded the courtyard across from the prefect's manor, and the resident children couldn't help crying in fear. Zhou Yu hurried to hush them and gestured. The owner's guards went inside, and all of them bowed before spreading open a huge, rectangular strip of a kite, pouring oil onto it.

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Xu Gong steered his carriage to Yan Baihu's manor. The assassins raised their torches, surrounding the entirety of the estate.

"Yan-xiong!" Xu Gong hurried off the carriage, calling out, "What is the meaning of this?"

“No need to speak!” Yan Baihu said. “If you allow me to leave today, you and I can still be friends! If you wish to stop me, then offer up your life in exchange!”

Xu Gong’s face drained of color.

“Yan-xoing, you must not do this! Xu-mou has no intent to cause you harm. Who has told you such nonsense…”

Yan Baihu didn’t give him the opportunity to sway him. Hundreds of his subordinates were already gathered in the manor, and he raised his broadsword, roaring.

“Brothers, come, carve out our path of escape!”

Xu Gong backed up, shocked. Yan Baihu led his men in a charge, and the main street turned into a mess of fighting and killing. It was nearing daybreak, and the cries and shouts of battle startled the citizens awake. Lamps lit in the houses as war cries echoed outside. Xu Gong hadn’t expected Yan Baihu to be so resolute, so after a few failed attempts at stopping him, he hurriedly retreated.

The two sides continued to fight right in the alley. Yan Baihu knew staying meant inevitable death, and he would only survive if he rushed out of the city. Xu Gong, on the other hand, kept bemoaning the situation, and he continued to fall back. He sent someone back to the manor for supporting troops, but Zhu Zhi—who promised to block Yan Baihu’s escape route—was very late to arrive.

“Kill!”

Yan Baihu and his men charged forward, sending Xu Gong’s subordinates flying and their horses overturning as they rushed into the prefect’s manor. Overcome with panic, Xu Gong turned to flee in the first direction he saw—the western gates. Wu County’s citizens had all woken in the middle of the night, and every window glowed with lamp light.

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Seeing the last group of soldiers within the manor had left to support Xu Gong, Zhou Yu whistled, rapidly racing across the rooftops. With a tug

on the kite, he leaped.

Behind him, a soldier waved a torch and threw it into the kite. It immediately burst into flames.

It was as if a fiery dragon had risen from the ground, and amid the surprised cries of countless people, it flew into the prefect's manor. The oil that had been poured over the structures caught as soon as it came into contact with fire. There was a huge boom, and blazing flames flared forth from the prefect's manor!

"Prefect Xu is being attacked by assassins!" a crier roared, dashing through the streets. "Return to your homes immediately and hide! Do not come outside!"

Soon after, when Sun Ce saw the city aflame, he led his troops in charging the gates. The subordinates Zhou Yu hid in the city hours ago rushed toward the city gates and threw them open.

The entire city fell into complete chaos. Just as Yan Baihu rushed to the gates, he realized what he was in store for and turned to flee, only to be captured by the Liyang troops led by Sun Ce. Xu Gong commanded only a couple hundred subordinates, and they were instantly scattered by the crowd of people.

As the flames cast their light all around, the members of Sun Ce's army loosed bolts, their tips dipped in anesthetic. They flattened the first wave of enemies before rushing toward the prefect's manor.

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Zhou Yu released the cotton string of the kite and ran into the prefect's manor. The fires burned merrily away, and everyone had already fled. Just as he was about to leave the manor to meet Sun Ce, a sash of white silk flew at him, coiling around his ankle.

It snatched him off his feet, and Zhou Yu slammed into the roof tiles.

"Who's there?!" a woman's voice shouted sharply.

A handful of metal caltrops shot toward him. Zhou Yu didn’t dare make a sound as he flipped to dodge, batting the projectiles away, even as the white silk about his ankle tugged him forward again. Though Zhou Yu was tall and large, this woman had managed to drag him several feet. She was well-versed in martial arts, and he could not afford to let his guard down.

With a leap that displaced the air around him, Zhou Yu spun in the opposite direction than the white silk wrapped around him. She yanked at it, once, twice, three times but could not catch him. Zhou Yu broke free from its grasp.

His assailant whipped out a dagger, stabbing at him with it before he could land. To evade, Zhou Yu twisted his body in midair, the dagger slicing him as he passed, his outer robe tearing. His skin ripped open, and fresh blood seeped from the wound.

Ducking, a hand pressed against the ground to steady himself, he avoided her next dagger strike. Following through with the movement, his body flicked fully horizontal, the cloth covering his face falling loose. He drew the Chijun Sword belted at his waist, and when their weapons clashed, the woman’s dagger broke with a gentle clink.

With two twitches of his sword, Zhou Yu forced her to step back.

“Zhou Gongjin?” she asked oddly.

Zhou Yu’s heart jumped. He didn’t know how this woman knew him, and his lips tightened as he pulled away and retreated.

“Wait!”

“We will meet again someday,” Zhou Yu said solemnly, before vaulting over the garden wall and vanishing.

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Sun Ce led his troops into the city, with stern orders that they were not to disturb the citizens. In name, they were protecting the governor, but in reality, as soon as they saw him, they tied Xu Gong up and handed him

over to Zhu Zhi. Seeing Xu Gong in bondage, his subordinates fled, not daring to approach.

Sun Ce ordered Zhu Zhi to guard Xu Gong, and because no one dared to cause more trouble than it was worth, not a single person stepped forward.

When the sky started growing bright, over ten thousand men entered the city, felling almost all of Yan Baihu's subordinates and Xu Gong's personal guards with arrow bolts tipped with anesthesia. In less than four hours, Wu County was completely pacified. All that remained was to suppress the fire, though it was a pity that the blood and sweat of Xu Gong's extorted citizens went up in flames.

Zhou Yu used the fire as an excuse to move Xu Gong's belongings outside, laying them all out along the main street. That day the residents of Wu County picked his hoard clean while Sun Ce turned a blind eye.

It wasn't until after noon that the fires were finally put out and Xu Gong was released and allowed back. Sun Ce sent troops to heavily guard the governor's manor. Almost all the people in the manor already fled, leaving behind only the governor—his face the color of pig intestines—and his madame.

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Zhou Yu was awake the entire night. First he swam in bone--piercingly cold water for almost two hours. After that, he intercepted someone, forged a letter, started a fire, and sprang an ambush. After all that, he felt weak and light, as if he were walking on cotton.

Sun Ce, on the other hand, was energetic, and without asking anyone, he strolled into the manor and took up the responsibility of arranging defenses for the entire city. Zhu Zhi stood aside while soldiers scurried to review the account books. There were twelve officials under the jurisdiction of Wu County who found out what happened when they woke up that morning, and they all came in to receive their orders.

Now Sun Ce held the majority of the troops under his command, and no one dared speak on behalf of Xu Gong. All listened obediently.

“Xu Gong,” Sun Ce said. “You hid the mountain bandit Yan Baihu in your den and almost cost the lives of everyone in the city in the process. Today, I ask you: Are you satisfied with this outcome?”

Xu Gong’s face was ashen, and he was forced to kneel at the front of the hall. He nodded incessantly even as hatred tainted his gaze. If he had known beforehand that Sun Jian and his group were cruel by nature, he would have expected to be ejected when his son gained Wu Commandery.

Zhou Yu said, “The lord governor was also deceived. Since Yan Baihu has submitted, why not allow the governor to atone for his crimes by serving?”

Sun Ce had not expected Zhou Yu to ask for mercy on Xu Gong’s behalf, and he froze for a moment.

He looked toward Zhou Yu, who indicated with his eyes that he should spare Xu Gong’s life.

“Ah well,” Sun Ce said. “Loosen his ropes.”

Since they were going to release him, it would look better if he proved his goodwill through actions rather than speech. After the ropes were untied, he rose and chuckled.

“Lord General Sun, you are very generous,” he hurried to say. “It was this humble one’s oversight, but thankfully you came in time, General.”

Sun Ce thought for a moment. Xu Gong had changed his tune so fast, it was comical. Zhou Yu could sense Sun Ce wanted to make fun of him, but Xu Gong was an official appointed by the imperial court and could not be humiliated.

And so, Zhou Yu interrupted. “Lord Xu, please rest well. As for everything else, plans can be made after my family’s zhugong reports back to Chang’an.”

Xu Gong escaped with his life intact; Sun Ce could have used any old excuse to kill him. Sun Ce was being magnanimous, so Xu Gong hurriedly bowed and thanked him before taking his leave.

The subordinates brought Yan Baihu in next.

“Kneel!”

Yan Baihu sank, shouting angrily, “I refuse to accept this! Treacherous plans made by treacherous bastards! What dirty tricks! Sun Ce! You bastard! Even your dad didn’t dare stand up straight when speaking in my presence, you little brute!”

Sun Ce’s temper flared in response.

“Whip him!” he roared.

His subordinate raised the whip and cracked it toward Yan Baihu’s face, and his skin split open. Zhou Yu watched, panicked, but the more harshly Yan Baihu was whipped, the more he cursed them out. He started with Sun Jian, moving to the Sun family ancestors. It attracted a crowd of citizens outside the governor’s manor, all of whom watched Sun Ce determine Yan Baihu’s crimes.

“Zhugong,” Zhou Yu said quietly.

Overwhelmed with rage, Sun Ce was about to order Yan Baihu pushed outside and beheaded when Zhou Yu’s gaze stopped him.

“You want me to spare his life?” Sun Ce asked.

“You must,” Zhou Yu replied. “Though this is a bandit, the worst crimes he committed were robbing households and gathering strong young men to rebel against the imperial court.”

Sun Ce protested. “I am the Polu General—”

“I know,” Zhou Yu said, frowning. “Spare his life first—”

“No way!” Sun Ce said with a jerk of his hand. “Absolutely out of the question! I went along with your wishes, even when it came to Xu Gong’s life…”

Zhou Yu’s face darkened. “Then, Zhugong, do as you see fit.”

Yan Baihu was still on his knees in the hall, mouth spewing filthy words. Sun Ce looked at him, then at Zhou Yu.

Zhou Yu’s face was flushed, and even his breath was hot. His forehead was boiling.

“Forget it, forget it,” Sun Ce said, suddenly bored. “I salute you for being a true man. Rise. Loosen his ropes.”

Taken aback, Yan Baihu asked, “You’re not killing me?”

“If it were my father here today,” Sun Ce said, “he would not leave your head on your shoulders.

“But I am not my father.”

Sun Ce rose and left.

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The rain stopped, and sunlight shone down brightly on Wu County. Leaves and branches were studded with gemlike drops of water. Almost half the governor’s manor had collapsed, but the back gardens and side rooms were intact.

Sun Ce tossed everything related to the cleanup over to Zhu Zhi to handle while he practiced staff techniques in the garden, shirtless. His moves sent red petals scattering across the ground, and as he swished the staff around, petals flew into the air, following every arch.

“Entering Wu County today means you cannot kill a single person,” Zhou Yu said, walking through the corridor and taking a seat on a stone stool in front of the corridor. “Only leaving Yan Baihu alive will make the heroes of Jiangdong come to pledge their allegiance to you.”

Sun Ce didn’t speak; he simply continued his practice.

Zhou Yu continued, “I already helped distribute the money Xu Gong hid among the citizens, on your behalf.”

Sun Ce slung his staff into a resting position. “The money isn’t that important. If I don’t kill even a single person, how will I establish a reputation?”

“Mercy,” Zhou Yu said earnestly, “is the best way.”

“What about my subordinates who died outside the city gates? Do they matter?” Sun Ce asked. “I used anesthetic arrows, but Xu Gong’s subordinates used their blades. Did you tally the casualties?”

“Forty-seven people,” Zhou Yu replied. “For an army of over ten thousand to lose just a few can be counted as a total victory.”

“Yan Baihu and my dad rebelled at the same time,” Sun Ce said. “If this bastard isn’t eliminated now, he will cause trouble in the future.”

“If he wreaks havoc in the future, we must get rid of him then,” Zhou Yu said patiently. “If you wish to be a zhugong, you must invent a way to subdue him. You cannot kill just anyone who seems disagreeable. I know your dad always did, but you…”

Sun Ce put his weapon back and walked away.

Zhou Yu’s head spun, and he rubbed his temples. His shoulder wound was throbbing. He pushed open the door to a room, staggered in, and, without the energy to figure out who it belonged to, fell asleep as soon as his head hit the pillow, unable to hold out any longer.

After sleeping for unknown hours, he heard Sun Ce’s voice, as well as a woman’s.

Zhou Yu felt dizzy and disoriented. He wanted to open his eyes and speak to Sun Ce, only to hear him ask, concerned, “Why are you ill?”

“Allow me.” The lady’s voice was warm. After she spoke, the sound of water being wrung from a cloth followed. An icy cold towel was laid across his forehead.

Their footsteps receded into the distance.

Zhou Yu slept a whole day and two nights, and while he dozed, the scent of medicine being stewed outside in the corridor filled his nose. A pair of slender hands supported the back of his neck, helping him sit up and feeding him medicine. In a hazy moment of consciousness, Zhou Yu opened his eyes and looked at his helper, and he thought she looked very familiar.

After that, he went back to sleep.

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It wasn’t until the sunlight came streaming in and Zhou Yu’s fever receded that he let out a sigh and sat up, his face sheet white, only to find that someone had changed his robes out for a set of clean ones.

He remembered a woman taking care of him. Then these robes… Zhou Yu hurriedly shifted his robes to check for the the inner layer inside, only to see that he was completely naked. Extremely embarrassed, he rose hastily from the bed, only to stumble.

“Has Zhou-lang woken?” a woman’s voice asked gently from outside the door.

“Yes…yes, indeed,” Zhou Yu said, his face finally regaining color, red to the tips of his ears. “Thank you, madam, for your trouble.”

“General Sun wiped your body down and changed your clothes,” the young lady chuckled. “He requested you to go to the main hall when you woke.”

Zhou Yu looked as if he didn’t want to bear witness to anything that happened after this.

“Thank you.”

He figured this was a serving girl in Xu Gong’s manor, so Zhou Yu didn’t worry too much as he tied the sash of his robes and headed to the main hall. Along the way, he saw the governor’s manor was already repaired by the soldiers, and they were hanging lanterns marked with the single character *Sun*. Sun Ce was treating this place as his own. Zhou Yu stood outside the second door leading to the main courtyard and watched for a while.

“Shift it a little to the left,” he said.

The soldier bowed and did as he was told, then hung another set up. When Zhou Yu looked, he saw the *Zhou* character written on them. He couldn’t help but find that funny.

He originally thought only Sun Ce was inside, so he didn’t expect two elders to be sitting there, along with a few young women. One was pouring wine for one of the older men.

“You’re awake?” Sun Ce asked, smiling. “Come, let me introduce you. This is Zhang Zhao, Zibu-daren.”

Zhou Yu stepped forward and greeted him in the manner of a junior greeting their senior. Zhang Zhao hurried to cup his hands as well.

“I dare not, I dare not. This humble one and Lord Zhou were both officials of the imperial court. This foolish brother is simply several years older, so please let us refer to each other as peers. I heard tell of Gongjin’s good name, but a hundred rumors cannot compare with a single look. Being able to meet you in person today is truly an honor!”

Zhou Yu replied, “For Zhang-xiong to finally give up on Tao Qian[33] and head south is a blessing for Zhugong.”

The three people in the hall laughed loudly, and Sun Ce continued, “This is Elder Qiao. You two are already old acquaintances. This is one of Elder Qiao’s beloved daughters, Qiao-guniang.”

The other man was Qiao Xuan, who had come to pay a formal visit upon hearing Sun Ce had gained Wu Commandery. It just so happened that a year ago, Qiao Xuan and Xu Gong visited Yuan Shu, and his daughter had remained as a visitor in Xu Gong’s manor. Zhou Yu thought, *Thankfully we didn’t kill him, otherwise we would be in trouble now.*

Zhou Yu took a seat, and Qiao Xuan then introduced the other young women as his daughters too. The one called Xiao Qiao had stewed medicine for Zhou Yu some days ago. Zhou Yu hurried to give thanks repeatedly, apologizing for troubling them.

“How is the situation in Xu Province?” Zhou Yu asked.

Xiao Qiao brought some plain porridge over, and Zhou Yu thanked her profusely once more.

He’d heard of Zhang Zhao before, and rumor had it that he was a student of the great scholar Baihou Zi’an. He participated in the governmental examinations when he was young, but because Baihou Zi’an was outspoken, honest, and blunt, he offended a lot of people. Lu Zhi, Tao Qian, and the rest of them cast him out.

Later, because of his master’s influence, Zhang Zhao talked back to the Xu Province Commander Tao Qian. Tao Qian locked him up, and he had only been freed recently.

“The north is still entrenched in battle,” Zhang Zhao said, stroking his beard. “The scholars all headed south, and it is not easy for even common people to make a living. A few years ago, Cao Song wanted to leave to avoid the disaster as well, but he didn’t realize Tao Qian would

come after him as he passed by Xu Province. Almost all twelve of Cao Song's family members became ghosts, wrongfully murdered under Tao Qian's blade."

"Cao Song…" Sun Ce said, frowning. "Why is this name familiar?"

Zhou Yu replied, "He is the father of the captain of the cavalry, Cao Cao. He's Cao Pi's grandfather."

Sun Ce's expression shifted, and he sighed. What a pity. The two of them had dealt with the Cao family before and hadn't expected such a tragedy to befall them. With Cao Cao's temperament, it was impossible to know what lengths he would go to for recompense on Tao Qian.

"As of now, Wu Commandery is in my hands," Sun Ce said. "That leaves only Lou Commandery and Haiyan. This is an initial foothold for us. The next few days will be a good chance to discuss our plans with Gongjin and Elder Qiao. I hope Zhang-xiong can provide a few pointers."

Zhou Yu drank a mouthful of plain porridge instead of involving himself in their discussion. He lifted his chopsticks, picked up a bit of some side dishes, and put them in his bowl.

"Temper justice with mercy," Zhang Zhao said solemnly, after thinking for a while. "Since Zhugong established a foothold by conquering Wu Commandery, then I imagine there won't be a lack of rations for the army, in the short term. According to the news I've gained, Yuan Shu will declare himself emperor soon. Chang'an has fallen into internal strife, as father and son, Dong Zhuo and Lü Bu, are now at odds, and they probably cannot spare any effort to govern this place."

"Yuan Shao's troops are stationed in Ji Province," Zhou Yu added mildly. "He is the only one who can trouble us, but with Yuan Shu in Shouchun, he shouldn't be an issue."

"Exactly," Zhang Zhao said. "The next step would be to head south."

Sun Ce asked, "What does Zhang-xiong think about expelling Liu Biao as fast as possible and taking Jing Province?"

You actually still haven't let this matter go? It truly appears to be difficult to accomplish for you, Zhou Yu thought.

Zhang Zhao replied unhappily, “Jing Province is a highly desirable location; it will inevitably be fought over. How can we send troops knowing that?”

Sun Ce hurried to agree, and Zhou Yu thought, *Finally his urge to seek revenge has been dispelled.* He had Zhang Zhao to thank for that; Sun Ce would’ve otherwise continued to insist on taking Jing Province.

“Yuhang, Fuchun, Kuaiji, and such are all in the south,” Zhang Zhao said. “These places must be taken care of as quickly as possible, while Yuan Shu is unable to budge.”

“Jiangdong is the land of the aristocratic clans,” Zhou Yu said, shaking his head. “It will be difficult to invade successfully.”

“One word: Kill.” Zhang Zhao made a beheading motion with his hand as he held Sun Ce’s gaze. “Right now, the power of the officials of the imperial court stems from a complicated web of relations. Even among Wu County, Danyang, Liyang, and the like, each has their own local officials.”

Zhou Yu frowned faintly, but Zhang Zhao did not notice as he continued talking to Sun Ce. “Your relatives are in Danyang and Liyang, so entering will not be difficult. But the further south you go, the sooner you must deal with these governors. Leaving even one in their position means one more issue to deal with later,” Zhang Zhao added.

Sun Ce glanced at Zhou Yu, the meaning in his eyes clear beyond a doubt—*I told you so*.

“The governors have guarded their territories for a long time,” Zhou Yu responded, “and if they do not stem from famous teachers, it is difficult for them to avoid being reprimanded by the court.”

Zhang Zhao replied, “That’s why we must treat the citizens with great kindness. If we spread mercy broadly and only kill select people, there is no harm in leaving those who wish to submit a petition for the emperor to abdicate, like Xu Gong. If they are not willing to cooperate, naturally the business end of a blade awaits.”

Sun Ce nodded, smiling. Since it was difficult for Sun Ce to speak freely in Zhou Yu’s presence, he didn’t say anything.

There was logic in what Zhang Zhao said, and some went against Sun Ce's wishes. Setting aside his attachments and expanding one territory at a time, killing any who didn't hand over their power and placing his own men there instead, was a good way to deal with them. But it worried Zhou Yu. If their actions were too ruthless, it would be easy for the aristocrats of the region to fight back.

Zhou Yu did not pass judgment on Zhang Zhao's plan. After finishing his porridge, he left his seat and took his leave.

***

In the night, he and Qiao Xuan sat down to face each other in qi.

"Gongjin, ah."

Zhou Yu placed a piece on the board. Qiao Xuan held a piece and tapped it.

"This old man wants to say something, but I'm not sure if I should."

"Elder Qiao, please speak freely."

Qiao Xuan said, "The Battle of Wu Commandery was fought beautifully."

Zhou Yu nodded.

"This afternoon the aristocrats from the north side came to pledge their allegiance, and they've all settled into the manor already."

"I saw." Zhou Yu turned, brightening the lamp a little.

Qiao Xuan continued, "You and General Sun may be childhood friends, but sometimes, you should let him have his way."

"Mm." Zhou Yu nodded again.

"As long as you don't find this old man's ramblings annoying, then all is well," Qiao Xuan finished.

Zhou Yu smiled and replied, "I agree. What Zhang Zibu said is reasonable; I am just naturally prone to indecision and hesitance. I always want to satisfy both sides.

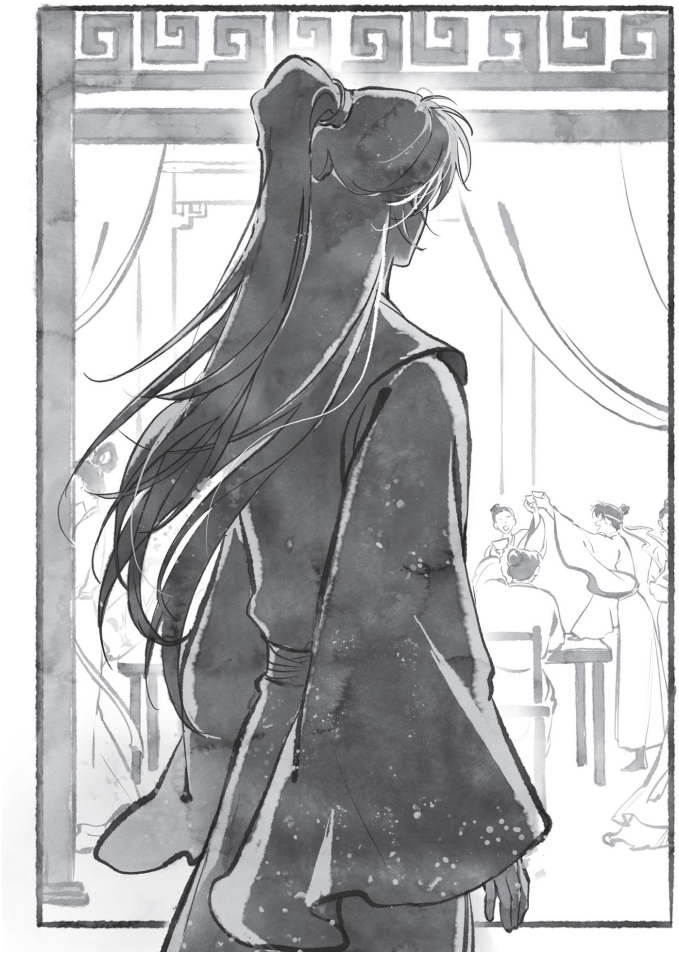
“There are many things in this world I cannot take care of on my own,” Zhou Yu said, sighing. “I’m not suited to lead an army. I can only direct them. The number of people swearing allegiance is increasing, so no matter what schemes I can come up with, there are strategists who will outthink me. Originally I thought about staying out of it, but since he has asked, I have helped him. Beyond that I stay silent.”

Qiao Xuan hummed approvingly, warmth in his gaze.

***

When Zhou Yu passed by the main hall of the manor that night, he saw the hall was brightly lit, and Sun Ce was holding a banquet for his guests.

The number of occupants increased day by day, and the manor grew livelier and livelier. Cao Cao and Yuan Shu had been at odds for a long while now, so the aristocrats had fled south. After entering Wu Commandery, they all came first to greet Sun Ce.



Since Zhou Yu was living there, this was a little too much for him. He intended to go back to Shu County to check on the naval troops and Lu Zijing.

***

A few days later, when the vestiges of winter finally faded into a warm spring, the entire courtyard filled with splendid peach blossoms.

Zhou Yu had found a qin in his room, and he plucked out a song. Xiao Qiao happened to be passing by, and she asked from outside, “Is Zhou-lang in low spirits today?”

“Ah, did you notice?” Zhou Yu said. “This qin sat around too long, and one of the strings is worn. When I get to that point in the song, the sound shakes a little.”

Xiao Qiao rolled up her sleeves. “Jiejie asked if the old wound on your shoulder is better.”

“I thank you for her concern,” Zhou Yu replied. “It is basically healed.”

Xiao Qiao continued, “On the mountain behind the manor, there is a hot spring. If the wound is scabbed over, you can go there to soak. The waters are warm and effective for healing injuries.”

Zhou Yu thanked her, and Xiao Qiao left.

***

Fei Yu brought him a letter from Lu Su. Zhou Yu wondered how Fei Yu went on its own to find Lu Su, but after reading the letter, he learned Sun Ce had invited Lu Su to serve under him several days before. Sun Ce had told him to finish whatever he was dealing with and come swiftly to Wu Commandery to meet with Sun Ce in person.

Lu Su’s letter also mentioned that Sun Ce had asked his mother and brother to come to Wu Commandery. Even Zhou Yu wasn’t aware of this, but he figured Sun Ce was planning to relocate his family. But the Lady of Wu was not willing to come. She wanted to remain in Shu County, and Lu Su would bring only Sun Quan along instead.

Zhou Yu wanted to go home, but since Lu Su was about to arrive, he had but to stay. Returning would not do, but not returning would also not do, so he could only take the letter to Sun Ce.

Sun Ce was chatting with a group of aristocrats, his entire face beaming with joy. He was even making jokes at Zhang Zhao’s expense while the man in question sat with a wooden expression, and everyone laughed again.

Zhou Yu smiled, and he knocked on the doorframe.

“Come, come, Gongjin!” Sun Ce exclaimed. “Come chat for a bit. Let me pour you a cup.”

The aristocrats all nodded, saying they’d heard of Zhou Yu’s name ages ago. While Zhou Yu wasn’t there, Sun Ce had probably praised him to the moon and back.

Zhou Yu, however, didn’t accept the wine cup.

“My wound is not healed yet,” he replied. “I cannot partake.”

“Our family’s Gongjin,” Sun Ce said, “is well-versed in medicine, and he’s basically cured all my illnesses. He maintains a doctor’s skill but also their temper, so if you don’t give in, he’ll hold you down until you do.”

Everyone laughed. Sun Ce continued, “They say a doctor has the heart of a parent, and Gongjin treats me even more severely than my mother.”

These words roused another bout of laughter, and after such a recommendation, Zhou Yu made his acquaintance with the group of people in the hall. Many were aristocrats fleeing from the north, and additionally there was Lü Fan, Zhang Hong, Zhou Fang, and others—all famous. Zhou Yu made his greetings before handing the letter to Sun Ce.

“From?” Sun Ce asked.

“A letter from home,” Zhou Yu replied. “Lu Zijing sent it.”

“I hear the naval troops under General Sun’s command can split the Jing River between them and Liu Biao,” Zhang Zhao said. “Very impressive.”

“You need to ask Gongjin about that,” Sun Ce replied earnestly. “He trained them.” Saying this, he turned to Zhou Yu and continued, “I told Zijing to bring the navy over, and they’ve currently moored the boats in Lake Tai.”

Zhou Yu nodded. “It’s up to you. Sun Quan came with him, but your mother said she’s been feeling lazy lately, so she didn’t accompany them.”

“All right,” Sun Ce said, nodding.

Zhou Yu went to write a letter in response.

Sun Ce said, “After you finish, come back here.”

Zhou Yu affirmed he would and returned to his room. After he was done, someone came to ask him a question; Sun Ce wanted to allot him an estate in the east of the city and was asking for his opinion.

“No need to reward me,” Zhou Yu replied. “It’s better to spend frugally during extraordinary times.”

In the end, all of this constant rewarding was just another way for them to spend their money. When he thought about it this way, Zhou Yu felt unamused.

***

This year, the spring rains were greatly delayed, and aside from a few short showers in the second month, there was a severe drought at the end of the month. He didn’t return to the hall to shoot that group of advisors obsequious smiles; after he wrote the letter and sent Fei Yu flying off, he put on his wooden clogs, circled around the back of the manor on a small path, and headed up the mountain.

There was indeed a hot spring on the mountain, but he didn’t know if Da Qiao and Xiao Qiao had visited before. It was tucked away and guarded. Zhou Yu learned Sun Ce had closed this place off to outsiders.

He entered the karst cavern, hanging his robes on a stalagmite at the entrance to signal to anyone else that the spring was occupied, and then he went inside to soak. The waters were hot, and when they lapped against his wound, they brought with them a stinging pain. Zhou Yu sighed, unbound his hair, and leaned against the side of the pool, arms propped up along the bank.

The stone stalactites around him dripped, the water creating its own light musical patter. But the chaotic voices of the governor's manor seemed to stick in his ears. That pleased expression on Sun Ce's face was so familiar and recognizable; yet it was not him anymore.

When he thought back, Sun Ce had acted like this with everyone, not solely Zhou Yu. Except for when Sun Jian died, Sun Ce always smiled. His smile could brighten up the entire dark and gloomy world and convince people to follow him.

Every time someone spoke, Sun Ce would make eye contact, a smile in his gaze. It served as praise, but also as a way to ask for advice with his mind open to new ideas.

"In our future realm, you shall be there, as shall I…"

Did he truly think that? Zhou Yu released a long sigh. *But wasn't this the best outcome?* All this time, he'd wanted this day to come for Sun Ce, when everyone followed him wholeheartedly and willingly, when his court filled with famous warriors and his army with brave soldiers. Today, in a violent world, he could hold his own.

Zhou Yu wanted this. Yet he did not.

A quiet tap came from the distance.

It was followed by the sound of scuffling.

Zhou Yu, eyes closed, soaked in the water. He heard the soldiers outside say, "General Sun," and Sun Ce grunted in response.

Barefooted, Sun Ce stepped into the cavern, treading on the damp rocks. "Hey."

Zhou Yu kept his eyes shut. "What are you here for?"

"What are *you* here for? I asked you to eat dinner in the hall, but when I looked, I couldn't find you."

Zhou Yu didn’t reply. Sun Ce stood in the steam.

“Damn, this is a good spot. You really know how to enjoy life.”

Zhou Yu opened his eyes, absorbing Sun Ce’s appearance. His back and shoulders were broad, and his chest sturdy. The lines of his abdominal muscles were defined, and his limbs were lithe and strong. In Zhou Yu’s memories, Sun Ce was a youth with inner robes paler than snow, wandering the underground lake beneath Mount Gu, but now, seeing him fully naked, Zhou Yu couldn’t resist a few more glances.

The steam made a layer of sweat break out over Sun Ce’s body, and minute beads dotted his muscular flesh, as if his skin was coated in oil. He reached down and casually wiped his abs before rubbing his hand along the back of his neck. When he noticed Zhou Yu’s eyes on him, Sun Ce’s gaze traveled downward.

“What are you looking at? You don’t have one?”

Zhou Yu chuckled.

“You haven’t seen it before?” Sun Ce continued. “Don’t pretend you don’t peek when I’m bathing.”

“I really haven’t taken note of it before,” he said. “Your scent is a little more distinct than your muscles.”

Sun Ce walked into the water.

“My scent?” he asked, amused.

They sat opposite each other.

Zhou Yu continued lazily, “The scent of your cleanly washed clothes, your shirts, your inner robes, and the smell from your neck.”

The two often slept on the same bed. The feeling of their rubbing feet pressed together, the scent of a man’s skin—both were deeply impressed in Zhou Yu’s mind.

Sun Ce raised a foot and rested it between Zhou Yu’s legs.

“You’re angry,” he stated.

In response, Zhou Yu kicked up a foot and pushed down on Sun Ce’s chest, trying to dunk him under the water. Sun Ce laughed and struggled, almost slipping in. Raising his foot, he hooked it around Zhou Yu’s leg,

throwing him off-balance. Sun Ce quickly grabbed him and made him sit firm.

“You’re angry,” Sun Ce repeated.

The two of them sat, facing each other. Zhou Yu was so warm his face was flushed red.

Sun Ce looked into his eyes. “Don’t be boring.”

“Forget it,” Zhou Yu said. “I’m not angry, I swear.”

Sun Ce put his hand on his knee, and Zhou Yu crossed his legs. The two of them were quiet for a moment.

“All of a sudden, I feel like it’s pretty dull,” Sun Ce said.

“You did pretty well,” Zhou Yu replied.

Sun Ce protested, “I haven’t figured out a way to give you a home to settle down in yet.”

“I told Lu Zijing to bring a thousand taels of gold with him. He’s already on the way. That’s more than enough for you to spend. How much is left from last time?”

“There’s not much more in the storehouse.”

“Wait. I’ll stay in the manor for now.”

Sun Ce seemed to feel guilty about asking Zhou Yu for money again. He let out another long breath.

“Wash my back,” Zhou Yu said. “One thousand taels per round.”

Sun Ce smiled, and he rubbed his hands together before beginning to wipe Zhou Yu’s hands and feet for him. He found the perfect pressure, and Zhou Yu felt comfortable, as if every part of him was being satisfied.

“Turn around,” Sun Ce said. “Lean against me.”

Zhou Yu did, leaning with his back against Sun Ce’s chest. Sun Ce’s fingers massaged behind his ears, then down his neck.

“Elder Qiao said he’d marry his daughters to us,” Sun Ce said. “He wanted me to ask your opinion.”

Zhou Yu’s breaths were a little shaky from the massage.

“Go marry one yourself,” he said, eyes closed.

“You’re not marrying?”

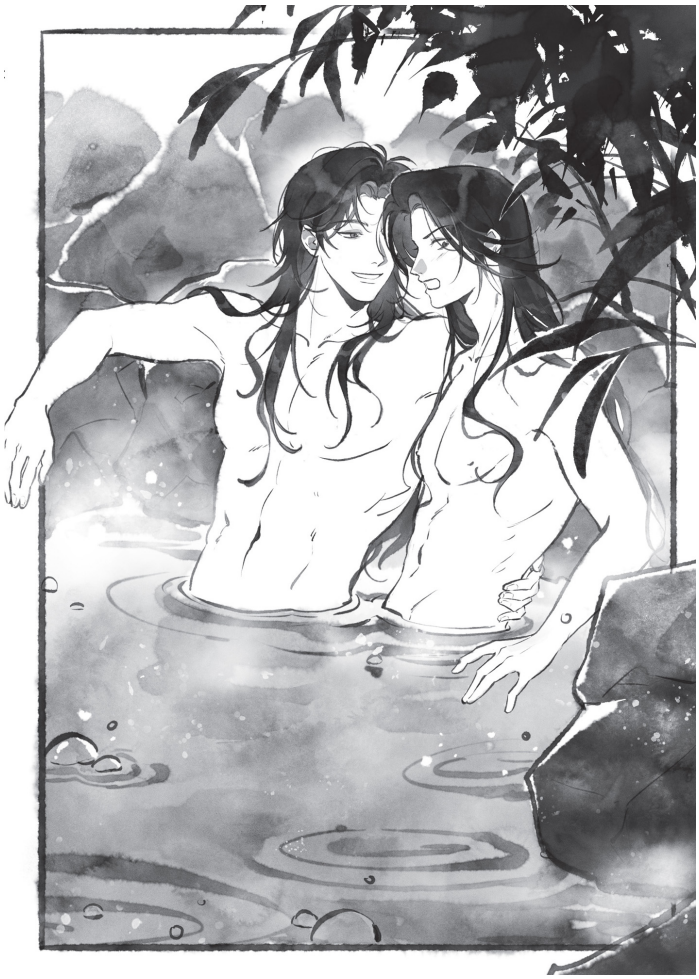
Zhou Yu said, “I don’t understand how to marry someone.”

“Let me teach you, then you’ll understand.”

Zhou Yu’s eyes opened. Sun Ce grinned.

Zhou Yu grabbed one of Sun Ce’s hands and twisted it, but Sun Ce grinned wider and grabbed him around the waist. Zhou Yu struggled, but Sun Ce was so much stronger he could not free himself.

“Gongjin.” Sun Ce’s voice grew deeper.



Zhou Yu exhaled. Steam from the pool reflected in his eyes, along with the damp, barely visible droplets of water beading on the walls of the cavern. Twilight was falling, and the light of the setting sun shone in from the mouth of the cavern, glimmering off the water, which rippled outward, eventually dyed by the faint red glow of the sunset.

It mirrored the scene, many years later at Chi Bi, where a great fire split the earth and set the sky ablaze.

THE STORY CONTINUES IN
Twin Jades of Jiangdong
VOLUME 2

CHARACTER GUIDE & GLOSSARY

CHARACTER AND NAME GUIDE

HISTORICAL PERIOD

Twin Jades of Jiangdong is set in the late Eastern Han period beginning in the 180s CE, before there were the three kingdoms that are more well-known in pop culture 220 CE onward. During this period, a puppet emperor sat on the throne, and many warlords fought for power, so various figures that appear here do not make it into later Three Kingdoms stories. Other notable names making an appearance are still yet to show up.

CHARACTERS

MAIN CHARACTERS

SUN CE 孙策: Courtesy name Bofu 伯符. Sun Jian's eldest son, brother to Sun Quan, Zhou Yu's eventual lord. He and Zhou Yu are the same age. They met when they were four and had a serious fight but save each other's lives several times over the years.

ZHOU YU 周瑜: Courtesy name Gongjin 公瑾. Zhou Yi's only son, one of Sun Ce's eventual strategists and generals. He and Sun Ce are the same age.

SUPPORTING CHARACTERS

CAO CAO 曹操: Courtesy name Mengde 孟德. Tried to assassinate Dong Zhuo but failed.

CAO PI 曹丕: Cao Cao's son.

DIAOCHAN 貂蝉: One of the Four Beauties of China. Wang Yun's ward/adoptive daughter.

DONG ZHUO 董卓: Formerly the prefect of Jin Province. Arguably the most powerful man in all of China currently. Deposed the previous emperor and installed Emperor Xian on the throne.

GAN NING 甘宁: Courtesy name Xingba 兴霸. The bandit-like ferryman.

GAO SHUN 高顺: A commander who serves under Lü Bu.

GONGSUN ZAN 公孙瓒: Commander of the first set of white-armored troops that fought against Lü Bu. Unlike most of the other military generals in this story, he is not known for his prowess on the battlefield.

HUA XIONG 华雄: Military commander serving Dong Zhuo.

HUANG GAI 黄盖: One of Sun Jian's generals. Old but fiery.

LIU BIAO 刘表: A distant relative of the emperor, governor of Jing Province.

LIU XIE 劉協: Emperor Xian. The emperor. A child.

LÜ BU 吕布: Courtesy name Fengxian 奉先. The General of the Household. Well-known for his fighting skills.

LU SU 鲁肃: Courtesy name Zijing 子敬. Zhou Yu's friend, also from Shu County.

MADAME SUN 孙母: Also called the Lady of Wu 吴氏 for her original family name. Sun Ce and Sun Quan's mother.

MADAME ZHOU 周母: Zhou Yu's mother.

QIAO MAO 桥瑁: One of Zhou Yi's old friends, the prefect of Dong Commandery.

QIAO XUAN 桥玄: Qiao Mao's nephew.

SUN JIAN 孙坚: Courtesy name Wentai. Sun Ce's father, the prefect of Changsha, known as the Tiger of Jiangdong. One of the eighteen lords who join the coalition against Dong Zhuo.

SUN QUAN 孙权: Courtesy name Zhongmou 仲謀. Sun Ce's younger brother.

WANG YUN 王允: The Minister of the Masses. Old friends with Qiao Mao.

WU JING 吴景: Sun Ce's maternal uncle, the prefect of Liyang.

XIAO QIAO 小乔: One of Qiao Mao's daughters.

XU GONG 许贡: The governor of Wu Commandery.

YUAN SHAO 袁绍: Courtesy name Benchu 袁本初. Yuan Shu's cousin.

YUAN SHU 袁術: Yuan Shao's cousin.

ZHANG ZHAO 张昭: Courtesy name Zibu 子布. A scholar who formerly served Tao Qian, now serving Sun Ce.

ZHAO YUN 赵云: Courtesy name Zilong 赵子龙. A commander who originally served under Gongsun Zan.

ZHEN MI 甄宓: Yuan Shao's daughter-in-law.

ZHOU SHANG 周尚: Zhou Yu's paternal uncle, the prefect of Danyang.

ZHOU YI 周異: Zhou Yu's father, holds a minor position in court. He had some skill in acupuncture, though he passed very little of his medical knowledge to his son.

NAME GUIDE

NAMES, HONORIFICS, AND TITLES

Courtesy Names and Given Names

Usually made up of two characters, a courtesy name is given to an individual when they come of age. Traditionally, this was at the age of twenty during one's crowning ceremony, but it can also be presented when an elder or teacher deems the recipient worthy. Though generally a male-only tradition, there is historical precedent for women adopting a courtesy name after marriage. Courtesy names were a tradition reserved for the upper class.

It was considered disrespectful for one's peers of the same generation to address someone by their given name, especially in formal or written

communication. Use of one's given name was reserved only for elders, close friends, and spouses.

This practice is no longer used in modern China but is commonly seen in historically inspired media. As such, many characters have more than one name. Its implementation in novels is irregular and is often treated malleably for the sake of storytelling.

Terms of Address

ZHUGONG: A term for a vassal addressing their lord.

GONGZI: A term to refer to a young master.

SHAOYE: Another term to refer to a young master.

LAOYE: A term to refer to a master. It can also be used as slang to refer to oneself in an arrogant way.

SHIBO: A term of address meaning "uncle."

LANG: A term of address meaning "man."

SHIZHI: A term of address to refer to another master's disciples, meaning "niece" or "nephew."

DIDI: A term of familiar address to refer to a younger brother or younger male friend.

Diminutives and Name Tags

-GUNIANG: A suffix used when addressing a young lady.

-DAREN: A suffix used when addressing a lord.

-MOU: A suffix used as a traditional way to refer to oneself in third person.

-ER: Affectionate diminutive. A suffix that literally means "son."

-XIONG: A suffix meaning "elder brother." Used as a familiar way of addressing a friend of the same age.

-DAGE: A suffix meaning "elder brother." It's usually used as a term of respect. It can also be used stand alone.

-**XIONGDI**: A suffix meaning “brother.”

PRONUNCIATION GUIDE

Mandarin Chinese is the official state language of mainland China, and pinyin is the official system of romanization in which it is written. As Mandarin is a tonal language, pinyin uses diacritical marks (e.g., ā, á, ǎ, à) to indicate these tonal inflections. Most words use one of four tones, though some are a neutral tone. Furthermore, regional variance can change the way native Chinese speakers pronounce the same word. For those reasons and more, please consider the guide below a simplified introduction to pronunciation of select character names and sounds from the world of *Twin Jades of Jiangdong*. More resources are available at sevenseasdanmei.com.

NOTE ON SPELLING

Romanized Mandarin Chinese words with identical spelling in pinyin—and even pronunciation—may well have different meanings. These words are more easily differentiated in written Chinese, which uses logographic characters.

Zhoū Yú

Zhoū as in **Joe**

Yú as in **uee**

Sūn Cè

Sūn as in sw for **sw**an, u as in st**u**ff, n as in whe**n**

Cè as in **cz**, **uh**

GENERAL CONSONANTS

Some Mandarin Chinese consonants sound very similar, such as z/c/s and zh/ch/sh. Audio samples will provide the best opportunity to learn the difference between them.

X: somewhere between the **sh** in **sh**eep and **s** in **s**ilk

Q: a very aspirated **ch** as in **ch**arm

C: **ts** as in pan**ts**

Z: **z** as in **z**oom

S: **s** as in **s**ilk

CH: **ch** as in **ch**arm

ZH: **dg** as in do**dg**e

SH: **sh** as in **sh**ave

G: hard **g** as in **g**raphic

GENERAL VOWELS

The pronunciation of a vowel may depend on its preceding consonant. For example, the “i” in “shi” is distinct from the “i” in “di.” Vowel pronunciation may also change depending on where the vowel appears in a word, for example the “i” in “shi” versus the “i” in “ting.” Finally, compound vowels are often—though not always—pronounced as conjoined but separate vowels. You’ll find a few of the trickier compounds below.

IU: as in **ewe**

IE: **ye** as in **ye**s

UO: **war** as in **war**m

GLOSSARY

COMMANDER: A military leader who commands a large group of men.

GOVERNOR: A high-ranking official often dispatched by the imperial court to keep an eye on a region. A possibly misleading nomenclature as they do not do any governing.

IMPERIAL EXAMINATIONS: A series of examinations designed to select the brightest of the populace to serve in the court as officials. They were separated into three main stages: entry, provincial, then palace, focusing heavily on Confucian doctrine and literature. Passing the exam was a great honor: The top scorer, or Principal Graduate, of each exam would return home showered in accolades. It was the only method through which someone could become part of the aristocracy.

PREFECT: The highest ranking official who governs a commandery (a region that often includes one or more cities).

RANK SYSTEM: For much of Chinese history, officials were divided into ranks which denoted their status within the court, with upper first rank being the highest. Courtesy demanded that lower-rank officials show appropriate respect to those ranked above them.

TRADITIONAL CHINESE MEDICINE: Traditional medical practices in China are commonly based around the idea that qi, or vital energy, circulates in the body through channels called meridians similarly to how blood flows through the circulatory system. Acupuncture points, or acupoints, are special nodes, most of which lie along the meridians. Stimulating them by massage, acupuncture, or other methods is believed to affect the flow of qi and can be used for healing or incapacitation.

LOCATIONS

In general, during the Han dynasty, regions were divided into three levels:

Provinces

Commanderies

Counties

CITIES THROUGH COMMANDERIES

Please note, most of the capitals of the commanderies and counties had the same name as the county itself.

LUOYANG: The imperial capital of the Han dynasty.

SHU COUNTY (CITY): Zhou Yu's hometown, south and east of Lake Chao.

XIAPI COUNTY: Located within Xu Province.

CHANG'AN: The previous capital of the Han dynasty.

SHOUCHUN: This lies to the north and west of Lake Chao.

CHANGSHA: Sun Jian served here as prefect.

WU COMMANDERY: Previously was Xu Gong's territory.

DANYANG: Zhou Yu's uncle serves here as prefect.

LIYANG: Sun Ce's uncle serves here as prefect.

LANDMARKS

LAKE CHAO: The same Lake Chao that exists in modern-day Anhui.

MOUNT GU: A lone mountain that sits on the banks of Lake Chao, opposite Shu County.

HANGU PASS: An important pass that lies just north of Luoyang.

REGIONS

JIANGNAN: The area of China south of the mid to lower reaches of the Yangtze River. Commonly thought of as a “land of plenty” due to its long association with rice farming.

JIANGZUO: The area south of the lower reaches of the Yangtze River.

JIANGDONG: The area specifically around modern-day Jiangxi, Jiangsu, and parts of Anhui Province south of the Yangtze.

THE THIRTEEN PROVINCES: Ji, Yang, Jing, Xu, Yi, and Liang are the main provinces covered, corresponding with the thirteen provinces of the Eastern Han as marked on maps.

About the Author

Fei Tian Ye Xiang (Arise Zhang) is a Chinese novelist who has been active since 2008. A romantic who crafts fantasy worlds suffused with eastern mythology, he has published a number of books in places such as Mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Southeast Asia, and Germany. Many of his works, including *Legend of Exorcism* and *Dinghai Fusheng Records*, have received manhua and popular animated adaptations. He considers writing to be the act of bringing boundless adventure to the mundane life of the real world, allowing his readers to follow his characters in exploring the endless possibilities of time and space. He hopes every world will leave his readers with everlasting memories.

Footnotes

Chapter 1: Peach Blossoms

[1] Form of address for a young master.

[2] Form of address for a master.

[3] The “-mou” suffix is a traditional way of referring to oneself in the third person.

[4] A term to refer to a young master.

[5] Suffix to denote a lord.

[6] Suffix that literally means “son.”

[7] A term of address meaning “uncle.”

[8] From Confucius’s Analects, specifically the fourth chapter called “Li Ren.”

Chapter 2: Becoming

[9] From the poem “有所思” of unknown authorship, written during the Han dynasty.

[10] Based on the time period, qi here likely refers to weiqi, which is the Chinese name for the board game also known as “Go.” It is often

compared to chess due to the objective of capturing the territory of the opposing player, as well as its high level of abstract strategy.

[11] The three herbs here have names that take on different meanings: zhimu, know your mother; yuanzhi, have great aspirations; wangbuliuxing, a lord does not delay in setting out on his journey.

[12] Ding Yuan was the official in charge of the province that Lü Bu was from, and he recruited Lü Bu for his feats in battle, but later, after Dong Zhuo occupied the capital, he persuaded Lü Bu to his side and had him kill Ding Yuan.

[13] The Spring and Autumn period (770–481 BC) was characterized by the gradual erosion of royal powers, and the Warring States period (475–221 BC) was marked by military reform and political consolidation.

[14] Wu Zixu was exiled from his homeland of Chu, and he belonged to the state of Wu. He was a major factor in the launching of a Wu invasion into the state of Chu. Either Lü Bu has been made intentionally incorrect or he may believe the legend that Wu Zixu and the scholar involved in the Dragon Boat Festival, Qu Yuan, were the same person.

[15] Referring to oneself in this manner is a humble form of self-address.

[16] Literally means “worthy little brother” and is a humble way of addressing a younger man.

[17] A famous physician who lived during the late Eastern Han dynasty.

[18] During the Warring States period, Jing Ke was an assassin who (unsuccessfully) tried to kill the King of Qin.

[19] Familiar way of addressing a friend of the same age.

[20] A hooved draconic creature of Chinese mythology whose appearance heralds the arrival or death of sages or rulers.

Chapter 3: Reuniting

[21] A person's eight characters are determined from the date and time of their birth and were believed to determine their destiny.

[22] A philosophy based around three main precepts: the strict application of public laws, the application of management techniques, and the manipulation of political purchase.

[23] Yuan Shao and Yuan Shu are either half brothers or cousins.

[24] A title of address that means "big brother," usually used as a term of respect.

Chapter 4: Breakthrough

[25] Also known as Zhang Liang, a great statesman and strategist who played a major role in establishing the Western Han dynasty.

[26] The seven orifices of the face, meaning the eyes, ears, nose, and mouth.

[27] This is just another name for Hebei.

Chapter 5: Life and Death

[28] A string of beads, in this case, used in Buddhism. Similar to a rosary, though that is used by a different religion.

[29] The Underworld, in Chinese folklore.

[30] This phrase translates literally to “person who pours out libations before banquets” and refers to a specific official position that existed since the Xia and Shang dynasties. Often, the person who pours out the libations is the eldest, or the most respected, and does so to worship the heavens and the earth.

[31] A general who served under Cao Cao. He joined up during the Campaign Against Dong Zhuo, under Xiahou Dun, who was a general under Cao Cao.

Chapter 6: Zhugong

[32] A famous general and politician. He is known for brilliant strategic intellect and tactical mastery. Once, at his lowest, a boy calling him a coward gave him an ultimatum: kill him or crawl between his legs.

[33] The governor of Xu Province, who died historically in 194 AD.

黎明将至之际
一道昏暗的线横亘于两人身前
群山之影伴随炽日初生的万丈光辉
缓缓苏醒
"你愿意和我携手并肩
征战天下么？"

张怡荃

Arise Zhang

With the coming of daybreak, a beam
of dim dawn light splits the space between the two men.
The shadows of the mountains are accompanied
by the blazing light of a thousand glimmering beams of day.
One man turns slowly to the other.

"Are you willing to stand with me, hand in hand,
shoulder to shoulder, to conquer the world?"

Fei Tian Ye Xiang
Arise Zhang

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Through the unforgiving gauntlet of war, Zhou Yu helps Sun Ce amass the followers and prestige needed to gain power. But as growing tensions test their relationship, Zhou Yu and Sun Ce must each weigh the cost of their own decisions. Can their devotion to each other survive the fires of conflict?

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